

# THE LIBERTY BOYS OF '76

A Weekly Magazine containing Stories of the American Revolution.

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## THE LIBERTY BOYS' RANSOM! OR, IN THE HANDS OF THE TORY OUTLAWS.

BY HARRY MOORE



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## CHAPTER I.

### HALTED ON THE HIGHWAY.

"Halt! Hands up!"

A handsome, bronzed-faced youth of perhaps twenty years had been riding slowly along a rough, mountain road in the western part of South Carolina, when suddenly the startling command given above was heard and he looked up with a start.

In front of him, standing in the middle of the road, holding leveled rifles, were eight men. These men were roughly dressed and there was a ferocious look about them that made one think they would hesitate at nothing. The times, too, were such as would make this view of the case probable, for it was the summer of the year 1778, and South Carolina was the scene of much guerrilla warfare between the Whigs and Tories.

These men might be either, but, of course, it was impossible to tell which, and the youth who had been accosted so abruptly paused and looked at them inquiringly.

"Ah, good afternoon, gentlemen!" the young man said, politely and pleasantly. "I am pleased to meet you."

The men glared at the cool youth and then glanced from one to another as much as to ask: What sort of a fellow is this, anyway?

"Oh, ye're pleased to meet us, hey?" remarked one, grimly.

"Certainly; for you can possibly give me some information."

The men laughed grimly. "Oh, yas, we kin give ye some informashun, I don't doubt er bit!" was the reply, in a somewhat ironical tone.

"I am glad to hear it."

"Whut d'ye wanter know?" was the query.

"I wish to know if you can direct me so that I can each a place known as 'The Bald Knob Tavern.'"

The men looked at each other quickly and the young traveler did not fail to notice this fact.

The man who had acted as spokesman so far seemed

to ponder for a few moments and then he said: "Seems ter me I've heerd tell uv sech er place, but I kain't jes' remember whur et is located."

"That is too bad," the young traveler remarked in a tone of disappointment.

"Whut ye goin' theer fur, young feller, ef et hain't axin' too much?" the man inquired.

"Oh, nothing in particular," was the reply; "I am traveling through this part of the country and was told that I could get a night's lodging there; that is all."

"Oh, thet's et?"

"Yes."

"Shore ye wuzn't goin' theer fur nothin' else?"

The young traveler looked surprised. "Of course I'm sure of it," he replied; "what else would I be going there for?"

The man shook his head. "I dunno," he replied.

"If it is all the same to you, gentlemen, I would much prefer that you lower those rifles," the horseman said.

The men grinned. "Ye don' like the looks uv 'em, hey?" the spokesman said jocularly.

"You are right; I do not."

"Look kinder threatenin'-like, don' they?"

"I must admit that they do."

"Waal, thet's ther way we wants 'em ter look; an' we hain't ergoin' ter lower 'em till arter ye hev answured er few questions."

"Then hurry up with your questions."

"All right; in ther furst place, who air ye?"

"A traveler."

"I know, ye sed that erwhile ergo; but I mean who air ye—whut's yer name?"

"Oh! My name is Sparks—Sam Sparks."

"Sam Sparks, hey?"

"Yes."

"Where ye frum, Sam Sparks?"

"From Ninety-Six."

"Frum Ninety-Six, hey?"

"Yes."

"How long sence ye lef' theer?"

"Two days."

"Be'n travelin' purty lively fur these rough roads, hain't ye?"

"I have a good horse."

The men eyed the horse—which was a magnificent coal-black animal—critically. Then they nodded their heads and the spokesman said: "I guess yer right erbout that. Thet is erbout ter cleanest-limbed animile I've seen in er long time."

"Yes, he's a good horse."

"Whur ye goin'?" abruptly.

"Over into Georgia."

"Humph! Over inter Georgy, hey?"

"Yes."

"Whut ye goin' over theer fur?"

"I have some relatives over there and am going on a visit to them."

"Oh, that's et?"

"Yes."

"Whut air ye—Whig or Tory?"

The youth eyed the men intently. He was debating what answer to make to this leading question. The men might be Whigs, and then again they might be Tories. Finally he said, slowly: "Well, to tell the truth, I am neither."

"Oh, ye hain't neether Whig nur Tory, hey?"

"I am neither one nor the other."

In answering thus the youth told the truth; he was a patriot soldier, and was not a Whig nor was he a Tory. The men took it that he meant he was not in sympathy with either the patriots or the loyalists, however; that he was neutral.

The man shook his head disapprovingly. "Thet's er mighty bad way ter be!" he said. "Ye orter be ther wun thing er ther other. I hates these heer nootral fellers, myse'f; et's mos'ly on 'count uv theer bein' erfaid is ther reezon they don' declar' themselves fur one side er ther other."

"Not always," said the horseman calmly; "I don't think I'm a coward."

"Mebby not; waal, young feller, ye kain't go enny furder ontill ye decide wun way er ther other."

"What do you mean?"

"Thet ye kain't go on ontill arter ye hev declared eether fur er erg'inst ther king."

"Oh, that is what you mean?"

"Yas."

"Well, which side are you men on?"

They laughed hoarsely at this and the spokesman said:

"Ye may think ye're purty smart; but ye kain't ketch us that erway."

"Won't you tell me?"

"Uv course not."

"Why not?"

"Becos ef we did ye'd say ye wuz fur ther same side ez' we air on, an' then we'd hev ter let ye go."

"Oh, that's the way you size it up, eh?"

"Yas."

"And you don't want to let me go?"

"Not 'nless ye air on our side."

"Well, I am not going to declare either way."

"Ye hain't?"

"No."

"Ye hed better."

"No, I shall do nothing of the kind."

The man was silent, pondering, and then he presently said: "Then I guess we'll hev ter take ther matter inter our own han's."

The traveler nodded. "I guess you will."

"All right, then; ef we must, we must. Hol' up ye right han'."

The youth held his hand up. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Goin' ter have ye take ther oath uv alleegence ter the king."

The youth lowered his hand. "You will have to excuse me," he said quietly but firmly.

"Whut's that?"

"I say you will have to excuse me."

"Ye mean that ye won't take ther oath uv alleegence?"

"That is what I mean."

"Waal, ye will hev ter take ther oath whether ye want er not!"

"I will never take the oath." This was said firmly.

"Yell take et er die!" The man spoke with sudden fierceness, and there was a threatening look on his dark face that showed he meant what he said.

"Surely you wouldn't kill a man for a little thing like that?" the youth remarked.

"Waal, now, we jes' would—an' we will, too, ef ye do take ther oath!"

"I don't see why you should do anything of the kind."

"Waal, ye see, et's this way: Ef ye hain't fur the king ye're erg'inst 'im—an' we make et our bizness ter ki ever'buddy that we cum ercross that ain't fur ther king."

"Oh, you do?" The youth spoke quietly, but there was a peculiar scornful ring to the tone.

"Yas, we do."

"Then you are a band of butchers, are you?"

"Butchers?"

"Yes."

"No, we hain't no ban' uv butchers. We air loyal king's men, though, an' we see ter et that all ther peopple we run ercross, whut won't take ther oath, die er sudden death!"

"I suppose you have killed a good many people?" in a quiet tone, but with considerable repressed feeling back of it.

"Ye bet we hev!"

"And I suppose you glory in the fact?"

"Waal, we hain't er-cryin' erbout et," with a laugh, which was echoed by the others.

"I should judge not," drily; "you don't look as if you were men who would lie awake, tortured by your consciences."

"Yer right, we hain't. But ye hed better make up yer min' ter take ther oath, young feller."

The youth shook his head. "I couldn't think of it for a moment," he said quietly but firmly.

"Et means death ef ye don'!"

"You are sure?" There was a peculiar smile on the face of the youth as he asked this question. The man noted the smile and did not know what to make of it. He looked beyond the youth and then toward the timber at both sides of the road. Then he said:

"Yas, I'm shore!"

"But sure things are not always certain, you know, my friend."

Again the man looked around suspiciously. He did not like the cool, composed and confident air of the young stranger. He did not seem to have a bit of fear of the men threatening him with the leveled rifles, and the dark-faced leader could not understand it at all.

"I don't think theer'll be enny mistake erbout this heer matter," he growled.

"You may not think so, but I am sure there will be."

"Ye mean that ye air shore that we won't kill ye ef ye on' take ther oath?"

"That is just what I mean."

"Waal, I don't see how ye kin he'p yerse'f."

"I suppose not," with a quiet, inscrutable smile.

The coolness and sang froid of the seemingly imperiled youth was having its effect on all the men and they cast nervous looks around them. They began to suspect that the young man was not alone—that he had friends near. How could it be otherwise? they asked themselves. Surely no person, if entirely alone, could sit there, threatened by eight leveled rifles, and not seem at all daunted.

"Air ye goin' ter take ther oath?" the leader of the party of Tories asked, savagely.

"I have already told you that I will do nothing of the kind," was the calm, even reply.

The men glanced at their leader and appeared ill at ease. They wondered, no doubt, whether he would give them the command to fire. They knew from past experience that under ordinary circumstances he would do so, but there was something about this affair that made it different. The bearing of the stranger youth was so calm and unruffled that they feared danger threatened them if they should shoot him down. The leader was evidently so impressed also for he made another attempt to reason with the young traveler.

"Ye sh'd giv' this heer matter yer bes' considerashun afore makin' up yer min'," he said. "Don' refuse ter take ther oath until ye hev thort jes' whut ther result will be uv yer refusin'."

The youth smiled. "I have given the matter careful thought," he said.

"Ye hev?"

"Yes."

"An' ye still refuse ter take ther oath?" There was a threat in the man's tone.

The youth nodded. "I still refuse!" he said.

The man glared at him for a few moments in silence, then he gave a quick, sweeping glance around and opened his mouth to give the order to the men to fire. The youth was watching him closely, however, and he got in his work first.

"At them, Major!" he shouted. "Give it to the scoundrels!"

At the first word the horse leaped forward, with a snort of seeming rage, and rearing up upon his hindlegs began striking at the dark-faced man with both forefeet.

## CHAPTER II.

### DICK'S MISSION.

This was so disconcerting that the men, although a few fired their rifles, did no damage at all. They were so busy trying to get out of the way of the threatening hoofs of the horse that they could not take aim—in fact, the shots were more accidental than otherwise.

"Give it to them, Major!" again shouted the youth, and he gave a slight pull on one of the reins. The next instant

the intelligent animal began whirling around and around, like a pinwheel, and the men had hard work escaping. Indeed, all did not escape, three of them being knocked down and trampled upon.

Seeing that he had disconcerted the enemy so effectually the youth gave a chirp to his horse and the animal ceased whirling and dashed up the road at a gallop. The road was rough, but it did not take long to get out of rifle-shot distance of the enemy, and then the pace of the horse was slackened to a canter.

Dick Slater—for such was the rider, as the reader has already suspected—leaned forward and patted the neck of the horse.

"Noble fellow!" the youth murmured. "You got me out of that scrape in fine shape, Major! I guess we rather astonished those fellows!"

The horse whinnied, as if understanding what was said, and arched his glistening neck proudly. He understood the tone, if not the words, and was pleased.

Onward Dick rode, keeping a wary eye out. He did not know but he might be stopped by another body of Tories at any moment.

"I begin to think I am in a dangerous locality," the youth soliloquized; "well, I hope my quest will not be fruitless. I hope I shall be successful in finding some trace of my old friend and comrade, Captain Shannon. If I fail it will be the death-blow to Miss Amesby, I am afraid."

Captain Shannon was a dashing young patriot officer. He had been sent over into Georgia to carry a message to General Marion, but had not returned. Plenty of time had elapsed and it was feared that he had fallen into the hands of the British or possibly the Tories of the mountain region—men who were loyal to the king and were at the same time really outlaws, since they lived by preying off the patriots of the western part of South Carolina.

Captain Shannon had a sweetheart, a Miss Alice Amesby, who lived Charleston. She was a patriot and was in the habit of riding out into the country and meeting the captain at the home of her uncle. The girl had waited until the captain had had time twice over to return from his trip into Georgia, and then, fearing something had happened to him, she sent for Dick Slater, whom she knew, and whom, she knew, was a warm friend of the captain's.

When Dick came to the home of her uncle she told him that she feared something terrible had happened to Captain Shannon, and asked him if he would not go and see if he could find the captain or learn what had become of him. "I know you can succeed, if it is possible for any one to do so, Mr. Slater," she said; "and I beg of you

that you undertake this work for me. I shall be, oh, so grateful, for my heart is slowly breaking, and unless my sweetheart is found and set free—if he is a prisoner—I shall die."

"I will undertake the work, Miss Amesby," said Dick earnestly; "the captain, as you know, is one of my best friends, and I shall be glad to do something for him. I have been thinking of asking permission to go in search of him, and now I shall do so."

"Oh, I am so glad!" the girl cried. "But you will no go alone, Mr. Slater?"

The youth shook his head. "No, I shall take my 'Liberty Boys' with me," he replied; "the hills and mountains of western South Carolina are full of Tory outlaws, and shall probably need all my force to deal with them."

"True; well, I hope and pray that you may be successful in your search, and that you may find Captain Shannon alive."

"I hope so, Miss Amesby."

"There is one favor I would ask, Mr. Slater, and that is, that if you should in any manner learn that my—the Captain Shannon is alive, you will send a message to me here at my uncle's to that effect. Will you do it?"

"Most assuredly, Miss Amesby. I shall be only too glad to do so."

Dick had then asked permission from the officer under whom he was at that time serving, and had taken him "Liberty Boys" and gone westward into the mountains in search of Captain Shannon, or of news regarding his fate.

On this afternoon of which we write, Dick had left the main force of "Liberty Boys" in camp, a couple of miles and had ridden forward on a scouting expedition. They were now in the region of the Tory outlaws, and it boded hooved them to be careful, as they were aware that the hills were full of the outlaws.

As we have seen, Dick had encountered a small force of the enemy and had come out all right, but he feared that he might have some lively times before being able to rejoin his force. The youths had been told not to alarm if he did not return till in the night, however, and he thought he would be able to get back before his comrades became very uneasy.

Dick could have gone back as well as forward, after having scattered the Tory outlaws, but he did not wish to do so. From a settler, who was patriotically inclined, he had that morning learned that up in the mountains, some twenty miles distant, was a tavern known as "The Bald Knob Tavern." This, the man said, was supposed to

the rendezvous or headquarters of the Tory outlaws and Dick wished to locate the place and reconnoitre it.

"I should think that I am not far from it," thought Dick; "if the man told me the truth, and I think he did, it can't be far away. He said it was not more than twenty miles from his house, and we have come nearly that far. Then, too, I can see that I am nearly to the top of the mountains, and that is where the tavern is located."

Onward he rode, and presently he rounded a bend in the road where a huge boulder jutted out and saw two persons standing at the side of the trail, engaged in earnest, even excited conversation. One of these persons was a man of perhaps twenty-five years, and he was talking loudly and excitedly; the other was a beautiful girl of perhaps eighteen years. As her face was toward Dick he could get a good look, and he told himself that he had never seen a more beautiful maiden, and very few as beautiful. As the man's back was toward him he could not tell what sort of looking fellow he was.

The girl's face was pale, and Dick thought that she looked frightened; and when he heard what the man was saying he knew that such was the case. The man was threatening her.

"I'll tell ye whut et is, Mary McClurg," he said, rapidly and fiercely, "ef ye don' say that ye'll be my wife, an' say et right now an' heer, I'll end et all! I'll kill ye an' then myse'f! I hain't ergoin' ter wait no longer. Quick! Whut air ye goin' ter say? Will ye be my wife er won't ye?" As the fellow spoke he drew a long knife and flourished it in the air.

The girl turned even paler and shrunk back, but her eyes happened to fall upon Dick and a look of joy and hope suddenly illumined her countenance. So great was the change that the man noticed it and whirled to see what had caused it.

Dick had halted Major and drawn a pistol, and as the man whirled he found himself gazing into the muzzle of the weapon.

"Who in blazes air you?" the man snarled.

"Oh, no one in particular," was the cool reply; "but what do you mean by flourishing a knife in the face of the young lady—that is what I would like to know?"

"Oh, et is, is it?" in a snarl.

"Yes."

"Waal, et's none uv yer bizness!"

"Oh, I guess it is."

"Oh, sir," exclaimed the girl, "he wants me to marry him, and because I won't promise he was going to kill me!"

"So I gathered, miss, from what I overheard him say

as I rode up. Well, I should say that you are exercising good judgment in refusing to promise to be his wife. Such a hot-tempered and passionate man would make a bad husband, I should say."

"Whut bizness is this uv your'n?" snarled  
"Ther bes' thing ye kin do is ter git on erbout yer  
ef ye hev enny!"

"You think so?"

"Yas!"

"Well, I shall do so presently; but just now I think I have some business to attend to right here."

"Ye hev no bizness interfereerin' in enny way!"

"My dear sir, I think you are mistaken. Didn't I hear you threatening to kill the young lady?"

"Waal, I hev er right ter do et ef she won't prommus ter be my wife!"

Dick laughed aloud at this statement. "Well, you are about the most original fellow in your views that I have ever met!" he said. "So you think that if a girl refuses to promise to marry you, you have the right to kill her, do you?"

"Waal, I don' think ye er enny other feller hez  
right ter interfere atween us!" was the snarling reply.

"If everything was smooth and pleasant between you there would be no need of any one interfering; but when you go to threatening to kill, then it is time some one interfered."

"Ye'll wush't ye hedn't interfereered!" was the threatening reply.

"Why so?" coolly.

"Becos ye will!" fiercely.

"State your reason."

"Waal, ef ye interfere with me ye doom yerse'f ter shore death, that's w'y!"

"I am not afraid."

"Mebby not; but that won't make enny diff'rence. Who air ye, ennyhow?"

"I think you asked that once before. It doesn't matter who I am save to state that I am a man, and one who will not stand idly by and see a lady insulted and threatened. Now just oblige me by dropping that knife!"

"Whut fur?"

"Because I say so!" sternly. "Drop it, and be in a hurry about it!"

The fellow still hesitated. It evidently went against the grain to allow himself to be forced to do anything.

"I'll put et back in my belt," he said, presently, making a motion as if to do so.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Dick sternly; "drop the knife! Drop it to the ground!"

Still the fellow hesitated. It was evident that he was contemplating making some desperate attempt, either to attack the bold youth who confronted him or to bolt into the timber at the side of the trail and escape. Dick saw this and said:

"Do you care anything at all for this fellow, miss?"

"No, I do not!" was the prompt and spirited reply. "I did at one time think I did, but his actions of late have caused me to lose my liking for him, and this last act of his in threatening to kill me has caused me to hate him!"

A curse escaped the lips of the man and he seemed almost unable to control himself.

"Good!" exclaimed Dick. "Then I shall have no scruples in killing you, my friend! The best thing you can do is to drop that knife, for if you don't do so, I shall put a bullet through you!"

The man evidently thought that he was in danger, for he dropped the knife. He gave utterance to a curse as he did so, however, and said:

"Ye hev got me at er disadvantage jes' now, but ther time'll come w'en I'll hev er chance at ye, an' then ye'll hev ter look out!"

"I suppose you will wait till you get all the advantage on your side and then go for me with all your might, eh?" remarked Dick.

"No, I don't want no advantage," the fellow declared; "all I ever want is er fa'r show."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yas; ye cum in heer all uv er sudden an' hez me covered with yer pistil afore I knows ye is heer, an' I hain't got no chance ertall. But I'll git er chance afore very long an' then I'll settle with ye!"

"I suppose you won't be satisfied until you do get a chance at me?" Dick asked.

"Ye bet I won't!" savagely. "I'm mad clean through, I am. Ye hev cum in heer an' interfeered in my aff'rs, an' that's sumthin' Ben Burke don' stan' frum nobuddy. I shan't rest till I git even with ye."

"Oh, well, in that case, Mr. Ben Burke, I guess I might as well have it out with you and be done with it."

The fellow looked at Dick in surprise. "Whut d'ye mean?" he asked.

"Just what I say."

"Ye don' mean that ye air goin' ter shoot me down, right heer an' now, without givin' me er chance fur my life?" It was evident that Mr. Burke was becoming alarmed.

Dick shook his head. "No, I won't do that," he said; "I am one who never likes to have anything deferred, however. I hate suspense. If I am to be forced to meet you I prefer to do it at once, and have it out of the way."

"Ye don' mean that ye'll giv' me er fa'r show an' fight me, now an' heer?" cried Burke.

Dick nodded. "That is just what I mean," he acknowledged.

"Say, that will suit me ter death!" the fellow cried. "An' I'll make ye wush't ye hedn't stuck yer nose in heer whur ye hed no bizness, too."

"Don't be too sure of that," smiled Dick; "it isn't a good plan to do too much boasting."

"Oh, waal, I kin han'le ye, all right!" confidently declared Burke.

"That remains to be seen," drily.

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed the girl. "I am so sorry that I have been the means of getting you into trouble!"

"Don't mention it, miss!" smiled Dick. "You have not done so. I will have no trouble in disposing of this fellow."

"Say, who's er braggin' now?" asked Burke scornfully.

"Oh, that isn't bragging," said Dick, calmly.

"Et hain't?"

"No."

"Whut is et, then?"

"A plain statement of fact."

"Bah!" snorted the fellow. "Ye jes' put up that pistol an' git down off'n yer hoss an' I'll soon show ye whether et is er plain statement uv fack er not!"

"All right, my friend; I shall do that very thing!" and Dick leaped to the ground.

### CHAPTER III.

#### DICK BESTS BEN BURKE.

As he did so Burke made a quick attempt to draw a pistol. It was evident, despite his talk of wanting a "fair chance," that he was a coward who would take an advantage and push it for all it was worth if he could do so. Dick, who was a splendid judge of men, was aware of this, however, and had not been off his guard even while leaping from his horse. He had kept his eyes on the man and had seen his action. As he struck the ground he again extended his pistol and cried out:

"So that is the kind of man you are, is it, Mr. Burke?"

You were prating about fair play, and an even chance, and here you were trying to take advantage of me and shoot me down without giving me any chance! You are a fine fellow, I must say!"

"I wuzn't tryin' ter do nothin' uv ther kin'," the fellow said sullenly as he dropped his hand from the butt of the pistol.

"Bah! don't tell a falsehood, my friend," said Dick; "I saw you, and what I see I know."

"I wuz jes'-wuz jes' 'feelin' ter see—ter see ef my pistil wuz still in my belt."

Dick laughed in an amused manner at this. "That is a fine story," he said; "well, I suppose any excuse is better than none. However, I know you intended putting a bullet through me without giving me a chance, if you could do so."

"I didn't mean ter do enny——"

"That will do," interrupted Dick; "it doesn't matter, anyway, as I make it a rule to always keep my eyes open, and it would be impossible for a clumsy lummock like you to ever get the better of me. You had better be careful, however, as I might get impatient after a while and put a bullet through you and have done with it."

"I hain't no intenshun uv doin' ennythin' that hain't fa'r an' squar'," Burke protested; and then he added: "How air we goin' ter settle this heer thing?"

"You mean what weapons shall we use?"

"Yas."

"It doesn't matter to me. I am quite willing to leave that to you."

A savage look of joy came into the eyes of the other and Dick noted it. "He thinks he will get an advantage over me by deciding upon the use of the knife, likely," the youth thought, and this proved to be the case, for Burke said quickly:

"Then we'll use ther knife! I see ye hev wun in yer belt."

"Yes, I have a knife," said Dick; and he added: "The knife is entirely satisfactory to me."

"Then git ready an' I'll carve ye up inter leetle pieces, in less'n no time ertall!"

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed the girl, who had stood nearby watching and listening eagerly, "I would not fight with knives. He is a terror with that weapon. He has already killed three men, and he will kill you!"

"Is that indeed the case? Have you killed three men with the knife?" Dick asked, eyeing the fellow sternly.

"Thet's ther trooth," with a sardonic grin; "an' ez she

sez, I think I'll make et four afore menny minnets hev passed."

"I did intend to let you off easy," said Dick, slowly and deliberately, "but if you are that kind of a man I think I shall have to at least lay you up for a while."

"I don't think theer is enny danger uv you doin' thet," with a sneering smile; "theer hain't nobuddy in this part uv ther country ez kin han'le me with ther knife."

"Still boasting," said Dick as he drew his knife from his belt. "Are you ready for the combat?"

"Yas, I'm ready. Air ye ready ter die?"

"No; and I have no intention of doing anything of the kind. How about yourself?"

"I hain't ther leest bit skeered uv hevin' ter do ennythin' uv ther kin'."

"You will change your mind before I get through with you, I am confident."

"I don't think so."

"I will soon convince you."

"Bah! Ye're braggin' now."

"Oh, no; simply stating facts."

"Le's git ter work an' stop torkin'."

"I am quite willing, my friend. That is the most sensible thing you have yet said."

"Bah! look out fur yerse'f!"

As Burke spoke he leaped forward, intent on making short work of the opponent who, as he supposed, would not be able to stand before him. There was no mistaking the fact that he meant mischief. That was to be seen in his fiercely gleaming eyes and his set teeth.

"Take that!" he hissed, striking at Dick fiercely the instant he was within reach of him.

Dick was on the lookout, however, and leaped back sufficiently far so that the knife did not reach him.

"You missed, my friend," said Dick calmly; "try again."

The other's coolness enraged the man as did the fact that he had missed, and a curse escaped his lips. "I'll get ye nex' time!" he almost shouted. "I'll cut yer heart out!"

Again he leaped forward, and this time, when he struck, Dick did not leap back. Instead he gauged the sweep of the fellow's knife-arm, and with a quickness and sureness that were marvelous he succeeded in grasping the descending wrist. This was surprise number one for Burke, and when he found that his wrist was the same as if held in a vise, that was surprise number two.

"Leggo my wris'!" he cried, struggling, but ineffectually. "Leggo, I say!"

"I couldn't think of it," replied Dick, calmly. "Let me see," in a speculative tone and manner, "where and how bad shall I wound you? I don't want to kill you as I do not desire to have your blood on my hands; but I do intend to punish you for killing those three men, and also to teach you a lesson and keep you laid up for a few weeks."

"Leggo!" almost shrieked Burke. He was pale, now, and seemed to realize that he had come in contact with a remarkable fellow. The wonderful grip of his opponent, which was like iron, was a revelation to him. He would not have believed any man living could have held his wrist in such fashion as this young stranger was holding it; but the fact was before him, and he could not get around it. He realized that he was in the power of the youth; that if the other desired to kill him he could do so, and the knowledge took all the courage and strength out of him. He grew weak and a cold sweat broke out all over him.

"I guess I'm er goner!" was the thought that flashed through his mind even as he shrieked "Leggo!"

"Oh, no, I shan't let go by any means," said Dick; "not until after I have accomplished my purpose. Let me see, I guess that a knife thrust in the right chest and shoulder will about do the business. That will lay you up for a month at least and put a stop to your persecution of this young lady—for that is a part of the understanding, that you are not to bother her any more. If I thought you would do that I would kill you, once and for all."

The calm, cold tone of the youth, and the peculiar look in his eyes terrified Burke more than words can tell, and he realized that he had got hold of a youth who was a dangerous person to fool with. Feeling sure that he was doomed to be given a bad wound unless he succeeded in getting away, Burke suddenly became possessed of strength lent by terror and he gave a great wrenching jerk and taking Dick unawares, managed to get his wrist loose. He dropped the knife in doing so, however, and made no effort to regain it. Instead, he whirled and ran with all his might, disappearing within the edge of the timber quickly. The crackling of the underbrush as he ran was all that could be heard, and when this ceased Dick turned toward the girl.

"Well, miss, he got away, after all," the youth remarked. "He took me by surprise. I thought he was too badly frightened to do anything."

"He is a dangerous man, sir," the girl said, "and you have made him your deadly enemy. You will have to be on the lookout or he will strike you when you least expect it."

"I have no fear, miss," smiling. "I have met a number

of such fellows in my time, and have made enemies of them and still live to tell of it."

"I know, but he has lots of friends in these parts, sir. You do not know. He is—but, there, I must not talk too much. I thank you for what you have done for me, and if I can do anything to in a measure repay you at any time I shall be only too glad to do so."

"Don't mention it, miss; I was glad to be of assistance to you. I have a sister of my own at home and I did for you only what I would want any young fellow to do for her under similar circumstances."

"May I ask your name, sir?" timidly. "I wish to know to whom I am indebted."

"You are not indebted to me at all, miss; but my name is Sam Sparks." Dick thought it wisest not to tell her his real name, as he was too well known, he having made himself famous as a scout and spy during the two years that he had been in the patriot army.

"And my name is Mary McClurg."

"I am pleased to know you, Miss McClurg," said Dick "and now perhaps you may be able to do me a favor a once."

"If I can I certainly will."

"Do you live in this vicinity?"

"Yes, sir; half a mile from here."

"Do you know all the people who live anywhere around?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll tell you what I wish to know: If there is anywhere in this vicinity, a tavern known as 'The Bald Knob Tavern'?"

The girl turned pale and an exclamation escaped her. "What is it, miss?" asked Dick.

The girl did not answer for a few moments, but looked at the youth with dilating eyes. "Y-you ask w-where the Bald Knob Tavern is?" she stammered.

"Yes; can you tell me? Will you direct me thither?"

"W-why do you w-wish t-to go there?"

"I wish to put up there for the night." Dick spoke quietly, but he was surprised that his asking the way to the Bald Knob Tavern should agitate the girl to such a degree. He could not understand it, but knew that he would soon learn the reason of it all.

"I wouldn't do it if I were you!" the girl said impressively.

"Wouldn't stop at the tavern?" asked Dick, in simulated surprise.

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because—because—I—I—don't think it—it will be advisable."

"And why not?" Dick was determined to get at the bottom of the mystery of the girl's queer actions, if such a thing were possible.

Suddenly her face brightened and the youth, who was a close observer, told himself that the girl had thought of something to tell him. "She is a good girl; of that I am confident," he told himself, "and she evidently does not wish me to stay over night at this Bald Knob Tavern for the reason that she does not wish anything to happen to me. I'll see what she has to say."

The girl was getting ready to speak and she said: "I'll tell you why I do not think it would be advisable for you to stop at the Bald Knob Tavern: The keeper of it is my father, and he is a great friend of this man Burke whom you just frightened away; he will sympathize with Burke for the double reason that he wishes me to marry him and because he was worsted by you; and—and—it is—it is even possible that—that you might be in—in danger there."

"Oh, so that is it, eh?" remarked Dick. "The keeper of the tavern is your father?"

"Yes, sir." The girl flushed somewhat as she said it, and the youth jumped to the conclusion that she was not over and above proud of her parent.

The youth glanced around. "It is almost sundown," he said, "and I don't care about staying out all night in the mountains. So if you will show me the way to the tavern I think I will put up there for the night and risk having trouble on account of my encounter with the fellow Burke."

The girl hesitated. "You would do better to hasten onward and get as far away from these parts as possible before dark, sir," she said.

But Dick shook his head. He was determined to spend the night in the Bald Knob Tavern. Had he not come two hundred miles for that very purpose? He would hardly flunk now that he was within half a mile of his destination. He had promised Alice Amesby that he would find out whether or not Captain Shannon was alive, and if alive to rescue him or die trying, and he had become convinced that if it was possible to learn this it was to be learned at the Bald Knob Tavern, or in the vicinity. So he said:

"I have ridden far to-day and am tired. I wish to rest and let my horse rest. I will stay at the Bald Knob Tavern to-night, get up early in the morning and go on my way, strengthened and refreshed."

The girl shook her head sadly. Dick could see that she had misgivings, but she said: "Very well, sir; come with

me and I will show you the way to the tavern, but—be careful, sir, and keep your eyes open and your wits about you!"

Then she started up the road, Dick walking beside her and Major following behind.

The brave "Liberty Boy" was going into deadly danger.

## CHAPTER IV.

### IN THE BALD KNOB TAVERN.

The girl was strangely silent during the time that they walked together, and it was evident that she was busy thinking. Dick, who was watching the girl closely, had a pretty good idea what was going on in her mind.

"She is a good, pure-hearted girl," he said to himself, "and she knows that her father is not all that he should be, and is trying to think of some way to protect me from injury at his hands or those of Burke, or both."

Suddenly Dick bethought himself that the girl might be able to give him some information regarding Captain Shannon, and he asked her if she had seen such a man as he described.

"How long ago was it that he would have passed this way?" she asked.

"About a month ago."

The girl shook her head. "I have no remembrance of seeing any such man as you describe at that time," she replied.

"I am sorry," said Dick; "I was in hopes that you had seen him and could give me some information regarding him."

"Was he your friend?"

"Yes, he was one of the best friends I have."

Presently the girl paused. "The tavern is just around that bend, yonder," she said; "now perhaps it would be best that I should not accompany you there. There is no need of angering my father by so doing. I will take a short cut through the brush and you will do well to mount and ride up as if you had come all the way alone. It may be that Ben Burke has not yet been here and told father about his encounter with you, and he may not do so at all, in which case it will be best for father not to know that I have met you."

"Very well, Miss Mary," said Dick; "it shall be as you say."

He lifted his hat as she plunged into the brush and

disappeared, and then leaping into the saddle rode around the bend and found himself within fifty yards of the tavern.

Any one who had ever heard of the Bald Knob Tavern would have known this was it the instant they laid eyes on it. The building was a large, ramshackle affair, and stood with the rear plump against an immense wall of solid stone at least one hundred feet in height and terminating in a large, bare knob—this being what had given the tavern its name. This was the highest spot in the mountains, the trail sloping downward in both directions.

"This is certainly the place," thought Dick; "well, I am here; now I wonder if I will be able to learn anything regarding the fate of Captain Shannon? I'll do my best to do so, and if I fail it will not be my fault."

Dick brought Major to a stop in front of the piazza and yelled out, "Hello!" at the top of his voice. There was no sound from within, and after waiting a few moments Dick again called out:

"Hello, in there!"

This time there came a reply of, "All right; comin'!" and footsteps were heard. The next moment a man appeared on the piazza. He was a heavy-built, powerful-looking man, with a dark, savage face, and was not what Dick would term prepossessing in appearance.

"I wonder if that is Mary's father?" the youth asked himself. "If so, she must have taken after her mother in looks, and I judge in character also. I don't fancy this man's appearance. He looks like an outlaw, if any one ever did!"

The man was eyeing Dick intently. It was evident that he was sizing the youth up and trying to make up his mind who and what he was.

"Good afternoon, sir," said Dick; "can I get accommodations here for the night for myself and horse?"

The man nodded slowly while his eyes dropped from their survey of Dick and paid attention to the horse. "I guess ye kin, mister," was the reply; "this heer is er tavern, ye know."

Dick, who was watching the man closely, detected a peculiar snapping look of pleasure and satisfaction in the man's eyes as he surveyed the horse, and instantly made up his mind that the fellow was already counting the animal as belonging to him.

"We'll see about that, my friend!" the youth said to himself. "You won't get Major without a struggle, I can tell you!"

Aloud he said: "Good! I am glad to find a place to stop. I have ridden a long ways to-day and am tired."

"Yer hoss don' look very tired, young feller," said the

man slowly, and Dick thought there was a note of suspicion in his voice.

"You are right; he can travel farther and show it less than any animal I ever saw. He's a good horse, sir."

"Yas, I kin see that. He hain't no common scrub Waal, git down an' come in; I'll hev yer hoss took ter the stable an' 'tended to." Then he lifted up his voice and called out: "Cato! Cato!"

"Comin'!" came from around the house and the next moment a hideous-faced, hump-backed dwarf put in a appearance. He had never been more than four feet tall and now he was humped so that he did not look to be much more than three feet tall, and he was almost that broad. His arms were large and it was evident that he was very strong. He eyed Dick closely, with a slumbering look of fierceness as he approached, and the youth returned the look calmly. Then the dwarf turned his gaze on the horse and he exclaimed: "Et's er fine hoss—yas, er fine hoss!"

"Waal, take 'im ter ther stable an' giv' 'im feed all water an' don' tork so much!" snarled the tavern-keeper. "Cato hain't whut ye'd call harnsum," he said to Dick with a grin; "but he's er good han' aroun' ther stable, after do chores aroun' ther house—yas, he's good fur that."

Then he turned toward the door. "Come in; come in," he invited. Dick followed the man into the big, front room which was a combined office, barroom and lounging-room. There were three men in the room when they entered—dark-faced, fierce-looking fellows, who looked at Dick in a pecculiar manner and then exchanged glances. Of course, this did not escape the notice of the sharp-eyed youth, though he did not let on that he had seen anything.

At one end of the rude bar which extended half way across the room at the farther side was a sheet of paper held down by two small stones, one at either end. Beside the paper were a quill pen and bottle of ink. Pointing to these the tavernkeeper said: "Jes' write yer name thee young feller."

Dick took up the pen, dipped it in the ink and wrote below the last name on the sheet the name "Sam Sparks". As he did so he quickly ran his eyes over the names written there and was pleased to see that of Captain Shannon.

"Good!" thought Dick. "He was here, then, sure enough. I believe that I shall be able to learn something regarding his fate if I work it just right."

"Hev er drink?" the landlord asked when Dick had signed his name.

"No, thank you," was the reply; "I don't drink."

"Ye don' drink?" the landlord gasped, staring.

The three men laughed aloud and in a sneering manner.

"No, sir; I don't drink anything stronger than coffee."

"I thort he wuz goin' ter say 'milk'!" remarked one of the three men sneeringly and loud enough so that Dick could hear.

"Me, too," said one of the others, and then he turned toward Dick and said: "Whur wuz ye raised, young feller, thet ye don' drink?"

"Where people know enough to attend to their own business and keep their mouths shut regarding affairs that don't concern them!" was the prompt reply, spoken with extreme coolness.

"Phew!" whistled the first one of the trio who had spoken; "he's sassy, hain't he?"

"He sartinly is!" from the one who had not before spoken. "How d'ye like that, Hank?"

"Hank" was the one Dick had answered so promptly, and it was evident that he did not like it at all. He had been stricken almost dumb by the cool and cutting reply, and was staring in open-mouthed amazement, a look of wonder and anger commingling on his countenance. At last he found his voice, however, and cried:

"What's that! D'ye dar' ter tork sassy ter me—Hank Mull, wun uv ther worst men in these heer parts?"

"I dare talk back to any man who dares direct insolent and impudent talk to me," was the calm reply. "I don't interfere in other people's business, and I don't permit anybody to interfere in mine or to insult me."

"Oh, ye air wun uv these heer high an' mighty fellers, hain't ye?" with a sneer.

"No, I am simply a man who is willing and able to take care of himself under any and all circumstances."

Hank Mull rose and strode toward Dick. Pausing within five feet of the youth he extended his huge fist and shook it threateningly. "D'ye know what I hev er good min' ter do?" he asked, in a voice of rage.

Dick shook his head. "I have not the least idea what you have a mind to do," he replied, calmly, but keeping a close watch on the fellow, for he was sure he contemplated mischief.

"I've er good min' ter smash ye flat ez er pancake—that's whut!"

"Oh, that's it?" Dick did not seem at all alarmed, and his surprised the spectators.

"Yas, that's et! An' I'll do et, too, ef ye don' ax my parding fur bein' impudent!"

Dick laughed in a scornful manner. "What! I beg your pardon?" he exclaimed.

"Thet's whut I sed!" threateningly.

"I heard you say it, but the shoe should be on the other foot. It is you who should ask my pardon, for you were impudent to me and I only replied to you in kind."

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared the big ruffian. "Whut! me beg yer parding, ye leetle sawered-orf? I guess not! Ye've gotter ax my parding, an' ye hed better be quick erbout et, too!"

"Oh, I had?" sarcastically.

"Yas; ef ye don' ye'll wush't ye hed, fur I'm ole pizen, I tell ye! This heer is shore death ev'ry time!" and he shook his huge fist.

"Do you know what I think?" asked Dick calmly.

"No; whut?" the big fellow asked, while the spectators watched the two with breathless interest. They knew that Hank Mull was, as he had said, one of the worst men in the mountains and they expected nothing else than that he would almost kill the youth who had dared talk saucy to him. They were surprised at the youth's coolness, too, but they set it down to ignorance on his part. He did not realize how dangerous this big, burly mountaineer was, was what they thought.

"I'll tell you what I think," said Dick, slowly and distinctly, "it is that you are a great, big blowhard!"

For a few moments there was utter silence and then the wrath of Hank Mull burst forth. "Whut's that!" he howled. "D'ye dar' tork in thet fushun ter me—ter Hank Mull, wun uv ther worst men in these parts? W'y, ye blamed leetle ha'f-size, ye! I've er good min' ter kill ye on ther spot!"

"Well, you are at liberty to make the attempt," was the cool reply.

Somehow Dick's cool and confident air had considerable effect on the big ruffian. He would not have acknowledged it, but it was so. Had the youth shown fear or nervousness Mull would have knocked him down without ceremony; but the youth was so cool that the man had been deterred and had contented himself with talking in a threatening and boastful manner.

Now, however, he decided to put his words into effect and stepping forward he struck at the youth with all his might. Of course, he did not for a moment suppose that he would fail to hit the calm face of the young stranger, and he was greatly surprised, therefore, when he found that his fist encountered nothing more solid than thin air. Dick had simply ducked and allowed the huge fist to pass over his shoulder.

The ruffian had struck hard and the force of the blow, when the fist encountered nothing to steady its owner, caused Mull to stagger and half turn. Dick caught hold

of the man's shoulder, gave him a push which straightened him up, and then with a quick, powerful blow, delivered full on the jaw, stretched the giant on the floor with a crash.

If ever men were surprised the tavernkeeper and the other two men were. They stared at Dick in open-mouthed amazement. For a few moments they were silent, seemingly unable to speak, and then they managed to break the spell.

"Great Jupiter!" gasped the landlord.

"Who'd er thort et?" from one of the other men.

"Et beats ennythin' I ever seed!" from the third.

Dick stepped back so he could have his eye on all three men, for he did not know but they would attack him. He did not know it, but Mary McClurg was watching the scene from the next room, through the half-open door.

The men made no move toward attacking him, however. Perhaps it was because they were so amazed by the downfall of their comrade that they could not think to do so; or it may have been because they thought he would yet be able to give a good account of himself and feared he would be angry if they took up his quarrel and disposed of the youth without giving him another chance at him. Anyway, they stood still and watched Mull with eager and anxious eyes.

The big fellow lay perfectly still for a few moments, seemingly dazed. He was not unconscious, however, and presently he stirred and then rose to a sitting posture. He felt of his jaw and then looked around with a wondering, confused look in his eyes.

"Whut hit me?" he mumbled. Then his eyes fell upon Dick, and it came back to him in a flash. "Oh, I know now!" he growled; "et wuz ye thet hit me! An' now I wanter know whut ye hit me with—an' then I'm ergoin' ter kill ye!"

He scrambled awkwardly to his feet and faced Dick, a fierce, threatening scowl on his ugly face. "Now, whut wuz et ye hit me with?" he asked.

Dick held up his fist without a word.

Mull looked at the fist for a few moments and then around the room as if to see if there was not a club or a rock or something near at hand to refute the youth's statement. He saw nothing, and finally gasped out, in a tone of disbelief: "Ye didn't hit me an' knock me down with—with jes' yer fist?"

"Certainly I did," replied Dick calmly.

The big fellow shook his head. "I don', I kain't believe it!" he growled.

"There is an easy way to decide the matter," said Dick with a brisk air.

"How?"

"Why, by attacking me as you did before; then I'll knock you down again."

Dick said this in such a matter-of-fact way that the four stared. "Ye think ye kin do thet, do ye?" growled Hank Mull.

"I am sure of it."

"Waal, I hain't."

"Try striking me again and it won't take me long to convince you that you are mistaken."

"All right; I'll do et. Look out fur me now!" and with the words the giant again leaped forward and struck at Dick with all his might.

## CHAPTER V.

### TEACHING A RUFFIAN A LESSON.

Again Dick ducked and as he did so he shot his fist straight out in front and it struck the giant in the pit of the stomach, doubling him up like a jack-knife. As the fellow's head came forward Dick's other fist described a half circle and caught Mull fair on the jaw. Down he went with a crash, and after writhing and kicking about for a few moments he lay still. He had been knocked senseless.

"There, I think that will do him for a while," said Dick calmly as if nothing had happened; then, turning to the landlord, he said: "If you will show me to my room, sir, I will wash up a bit and get ready to eat supper."

"Yas, yas—sartinly!" the landlord hastened to say speaking like a man just aroused from sound slumber. "Yas, jes' cum this way, young feller, an' I'll show ye to yer room."

"Throw a little water in his face and he will soon come to," said Dick to the insensible man's comrades as he passed them, and one hastened to a pail standing on the end of the bar, and dipping up a gourdful of the water he went back and threw it in Mull's face.

The landlord conducted Dick along a hall and up a flight of stairs and opened a door at one side. "Theer yer room," he said; "I guess ye'll fin' et comfortable. Supper'll be reddy in erbout three-quarters uv an hour."

"All right," said Dick; "I'll come down at about tha time."

He entered the room and closed the door and the landlady hastened back downstairs and to the barroom.

Hank Mull had just regained consciousness and been helped to a seat by his comrades and the landlord approached and looked at the vanquished giant wonderingly. Then he looked at the other two. "How did he do et?" he asked, nodding toward the upstairs.

The two shook their heads in a mournful manner. "I know nothin'," replied one.

"I wouldn't have berleaved et posseble," from the other. "Neither would I ef I hedn' seen et with my own eyes," the landlord said.

"Whut happened?" asked Hank Mull at this juncture. His voice was weak and he looked around him wonderingly and questioningly. "Seems ter me ez ef sumthin' hit me in ther stummick," feeling gingerly, "an' on ther jaw!" lying there in turn. "Whut wuz et, ennyhow?"

"Et wuz thet young feller's fists," replied one of them.

Hank gave a start and the remembrance of it all came back to him. "I know now," he cried; "thet cussid younker hit me, didn't he?"

"He sartinly did."

"But he—he mus' have hit me with sumthin' else bersides his fists."

The men shook their heads. "He didn't do ennythin' to me, Hank," said the landlord; "he giv' ye er couple uv clips with his fists an' nothin' else."

Hank shook his head mournfully. "I kain't unnerstand it," he said. "How did ther younker do et, that's what I'd like ter know?"

"Waal, he done et mighty easy," said one of the men; "ir, I didn't seem ter cut enny figger ertall, Hank."

"Waal, I will cut sum figger afore ther thing is ended!" said the man, savagely. "I'm goin' ter hav' er settlement with that younker, an' ye bet the nex' time I'll show 'im he teet he hain't ther boss!"

"Waal, ye hed better try sumthin' else bersides fists, comon, Hank," advised one; "ye hain't got no bizness with us when et comes ter fist fightin'."

"Oh, I hain't ergoin' ter try 'im erg'in with fists. I've been rernuff uv that. Nex' time et'll be knives, an' I guess et I'll—"

"Git fooled ther same ez ye did with fists!" said a voice, and the four whirled, with exclamations of astonishment to see a man standing near them, looking at Hank with a smile on his face.

"Oh, et's you, Ben Burke, is et?" exclaimed Hank.

"Yas, et's me."

"Whut'd ye mean by whut ye jes' said?"

"About your getting fooled the same as with the fists?"

"Yas."

"I meant whut I said."

"Mebby ye did, but did ye know whut ye wuz torkin' erbout? D'ye know who we wuz torkin' erbout?"

"I think so; et wuz erbout er harnsum young stranger whut cum erlong er leetle while ergo, ridin' er black hoss—hain't that right?"

The landlord nodded. "Thet's right," he said.

"I thort so; waal, I know whut I'm torkin' erbout when I say ye'll git fooled ef ye tackle 'im with knives."

Hank shook his head and looked scornful. "Ef I kain't do that younker up with knives then I'll go off sumwhur an' jump over er precypuss!" he sneered. "He may be handy with his fists, but when et cum ter knives he won't be in et ertall. W'y, ye know yerse'f, Ben, that ye air ther on'y feller in these mountings that is better with ther knife than whut I am."

Burke shook his head. "No, I don't know ennythin' uv ther kin'."

The four stared at Ben in surprise. He had long borne the reputation of being the best hand with knife or pistol in the mountains, and they did not know what to make of his denial that he was the only one who was better than Ben.

"Whut d'ye mean?" asked the landlord.

"Jes' whut I say; I hain't ther on'y wun ez is better than ye air, Hank."

"Who is better bersides yerse'f, then?"

"Ther young feller ye air torkin' erbout tacklin'." Burke said this quietly, but the others stared at him in wondering amazement.

"Ye mus' be jokin'," the landlord said.

"How d'ye know ennythin' erbout whut he kin do with er knife?" asked Hank.

"The same way ye know whut he kin do with his fists."

The four stared at Burke in astonishment. "Ye don't mean ter say ez how ye hav' hed er fight with 'im with knives?" almost gasped Hank.

Burke nodded. "Thet is jes' whut I do mean ter say!"

"But," said the landlord, hesitatingly, "he don't show no signs uv enny wounds ertall, an' ef he met ye with er knife he couldn't hav' got through without bein' wounded."

"But he did do that very thing."

"Humph! that is queer; an' ye wuzn't wounded, eether?"

"No; but I cum mighty near bein'. I think I wuz in luck ter git out uv ther affair without bein' wounded."

"Tell us erbout et, Ben," said the landlord, and the

young man did so. Then, when he had finished, he turned to Hank, with the remark: "You see, you don' wanter hev nothin' ter do with that feller with er knife, ole man."

"I see that I don', that's er fack," Hank acknowledged. "Say, he mus' be er mighty bad man fur er younker, hey?"

"He sartinly is," agreed Burke; "an' et won't do ter giy' 'im er fa'r show. We mus' take 'im at er disadvantage, ef we wanter be shore uv gittin' ther best uv 'im."

"An' ye say that Mary refused ter prommus ter be yer wife, Ben?" asked the landlord.

"That's what she did!" with a frown.

"D'y'e s'pose et wuz on account uv this heer young feller?"

Ben shook his head. "Oh, no," he replied; "she hed refused afore he cum erlong. Afore she hed seen 'im."

"Waal, I guess we'll hev ter 'tend ter ther feller's case, ennyhow. He's ermos' too brash, an' I think we hed better take 'im down er peg er two."

"That's right; an' he may furnish purty good pickin'. He looks ez ef he might hev gold in his pockets."

"Yas; an' he hez er mighty fine hoss."

"That's right; that hain't no common scrub uv er hoss."

"I won't never be contented till arter I hev got revenge fur ther way he thumped me aroun'," growled Hank.

"Et's ther same with me, Hank," said Ben; "I shan't never rest easy till I hev settled with 'im fur ther way he handled me."

"Ye shall both hev er chance ter settle with 'im," said the landlord; "but we will make 'im er pris'ner furst an' hol' 'im ter see ef he hez enny frien's whut might make trubble, an' then ef we fin' that he hain't, ye kin do whut ye wanter with 'im."

"Fur my part I don' see w'y ye sh'd wait," growled Hank; "ef he hez frien's, an' they cum erlong, they won' know nothin' erbout us goin' fur 'im. They'll think he went on an' got killed in ther mountings sumwhurs."

"Jes' ther same, we'll hol' 'im fur erwhile. I don' wanter take enny more chances than we haf ter."

"I don' keer whether we kill 'im right erway er not," said Burke; "I think et'll be more revenge ter hol' 'im er pris'ner fur erwhile an' make 'im suffer that erway."

"That's right," agreed the landlord. "Hist! he's comin'. Ef ye don' wanter hev et out with 'im ye hed better skip Hank."

"I'll go erlong uv ye, fur I don' wanter see 'im jes' now er hev 'im see me," said Burke; and the two hastily left the barroom.

A few moments later Dick entered the room. "Is supper ready, landlord?" he asked.

"Almos'," was the reply; "set down. Et'll be reddy er minnet."

Dick took a seat and then glancing at the two men, quiringly, he asked: "What has become of your big friend?

"He went erway," replied one, sullenly.

"Ah, indeed? I imagined he would be waiting here me, ready to have it out with knife or pistol."

The men looked at Dick curiously. He was so cool and unconcerned that they did not know what to think.

"He hed ter go erway," one said shortly; "I guess he be back erg'in."

"I hope he will come in peace, then—for his own sake," was the quiet reply. "I should hate to be forced to meet the fellow."

Again the men exchanged glances of wonder and amusement. They realized that there was no bravado about the utterances of this cool, quiet young stranger, and they made up their minds that he must be a dangerous fellow indeed.

"I guess he hez got all he wants," said one of the men.

"I should think that was the case," calmly; "if he hasn't, he is a hog."

The men did not seem to care about talking, but I asked them a number of questions, nevertheless. I watched them closely, and noted their actions more than their spoken answers to his questions. Presently two got up and after taking a drink at the bar went off doors.

"Seems ter me ye air er leetle bit inquisitive, you feller," said the landlord, eyeing Dick searchingly, while the two had gone.

"Oh, no, not at all," replied Dick, in an offhand manner and with a bland smile; "I just wanted to be sociable, sir, is all."

"Humph!" the man grunted. "Ye air erbout ther it soshible young feller I've seen fur er long while."

"I don't believe in being unsociable," was the quick reply. "Be friendly, is my motto."

"I've notussed that ye air er fr'en'ly sort uv er fellg." This was said in a sarcastic tone, and Dick smiled.

"Well, I meet people in their own way," he said; "I'm sociable and friendly if they will let me be so. But if they won't do that and insist on being mean, I accommodate them."

"Yas, I guess that's so," the landlord said.

He went out and was gone a few minutes and then turned and announced that supper was ready. "This is what he said, and he conducted Dick into the dining-room.

dicated a seat at one of the tables. "My darter'll wait ye," he added, and then went back to the barroom.

The beautiful girl, in whose behalf he had interfered when threatened by Ben Burke, entered the room now, and, approaching the table, began arranging the dishes containing the food. She acted just as if she had never seen Dick before, but when bending over she whispered:

"You are in great danger here; you must leave at the earliest possible moment."

"How am I in danger?" the youth asked.

"I cannot explain, as I am watched from both the kitchen and barroom; but you will do well if you seize the first opportunity for escaping."

"I thank you for the warning," said Dick; "but I think shall stay here overnight."

"Don't do it!" in a trembling whisper.

"Yes, I shall stay."

"Please don't! The danger is far greater than you link."

"I will remain, just the same, and risk it. I am not afraid of what may happen."

"Oh, I hope you will change your mind!" and with this girl left the room.

## CHAPTER VI.

### DICK CAUSES CONSIDERABLE EXCITEMENT.

Dick was hungry and ate his supper with a good relish, notwithstanding the fact that he had just been warned that he was in great danger. He was a youth who was not easily disturbed. He had been in danger so constantly for two years past that he had grown used to it, and thought nothing of it. He had great confidence in himself, too, and this made it easier for him to keep cool and look at things with equanimity.

Still he had no intention of remaining at the tavern all night. He would have to get back to the encampment of the "Liberty Boys" by midnight or they would be uneasy about him. What he wished to do was to look through the tavern and see if he could find anything that would indicate what had been the fate of Captain Shannon. The captain had been here, Dick knew, for his name was on the register-sheet down in the barroom; and what the youth wished to find out was whether or not he had gotten away from the tavern in safety.

Dick finished his supper and went back into the barroom.

The landlord was there alone. "Git ernuff ter eet?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," was the reply; "it was the best meal I have eaten in many days."

"Glad uv thet; then ef ye meet ennybuddy travelin' this way, ye kin say er good word fur my tavern."

"Yes, indeed; certainly!" said Dick.

He remained in the barroom half an hour or so and then went to his room, ostensibly to go to bed. He was careful to state that he was sleepy and in need of a good night's rest, and this statement brought a look of satisfaction into the eyes of the landlord, which Dick did not fail to notice.

"All right, my friend; but I think I will fool you a bit," said Dick to himself. "I do not intend to let you catch me asleep and do what you like with me, as I begin to believe you did with Captain Shannon."

Dick did not lie down on reaching his room. He simply fastened the door and sat down to wait for the members of the household to get through with their evening work and retire for the night.

He waited two hours, and then opened his door carefully and stepped out into the hall. He paused and listened. He could hear the hum of voices in the direction of the barroom and stole in that direction. He reached the door which opened into the barroom, and listened. He could hear and understand what was said.

"D'y'e s'pose he's ersleep yit?" he heard a voice say, and he smiled as he recognized it as being that of Hank Mull.

"My big friend wishes to have revenge for the way I handled him," Dick said to himself; "well, I suppose I should do so, too, if I were in his place."

"He may be, but ther hain't no hurry," was the reply in the voice of the landlord; "the longer we wait ther sounder he'll be ersleep, an' I think frum all I've seen uv 'im that the sounder ersleep he is when we tackle 'im ther better et'll be fur us."

"Thet's so," said another voice which Dick recognized as belonging to Ben Burke; "thet feller hain't ter be fooled with, I tell ye, an' I'd ruther tackle 'im when he's soundersleep than when he hain't."

"We'll wait an' hour er so," said the landlord, "an' give 'im plenty uv time ter git ter sleep. Ther hain't no hurry. We hain't ther airy-ter-bed kin', ennyway."

"So I have an hour or so in which to pursue my investigations, eh?" thought Dick. "Good! I will get to work. I ought to be able to go over the house in that time."

He made his way along the hall and entered the kitchen. Here he lighted a candle and looked about him. He found

the trap-door which undoubtedly led to the cellar, and opening it he went down the rickety steps. He searched the cellar thoroughly, but could find no clothing or anything to indicate that Captain Shannon had ever been there. Dick thought it likely that if the captain had been made away with, some of his clothing would be found.

Having finished in the cellar Dick went back up and began making the rounds of the rooms on the ground floor. There were not many rooms here as they were large, and not finding anything the youth went upstairs. He began a systematic search there, but had to be careful, as the girl and the cook occupied two of the rooms.

By listening at the keyholes he was enabled to hear the breathing of the inmates and thus avoided entering the rooms that were occupied.

He searched thoroughly, and then went up into the attic, but here also he failed, and at last was forced to give it up. "It looks as if I am doomed to disappointment," he said to himself; "I have found nothing to indicate that Captain Shannon met with foul play here. Had I done so I could have come upon the tavern with my 'Liberty Boys' and forced the landlord to tell me what they did with the captain. Now I hardly know what to do. Ah! I guess they are coming, now, for the purpose of attending to my case!" as the sound of a door opening and the trampling of feet came to his ears.

He was right; the landlord and five companions were coming up the stairs. The landlord was in the lead, carrying a candle, and behind him came the five, with knives and pistols in their hands.

Dick had extinguished his light the instant he heard the noise made by the men, and they, of course, could not see him. Indeed, they supposed he was in his room, fast asleep, and did not look in his direction at all.

The youth descended the stairs, and, pausing, debated with himself regarding what he should do. He knew he could not get past them, and realizing that they would soon learn that he was not in the room, and would raise a hue and cry, he made up his mind to take some risks and get out of the house. He stole forward and entered a room which he had been in already and knew was empty. He fastened the door, and then stepping across to where he knew the window was, although he could not see it, he opened it. He lost not an instant as he expected to hear an uproar at any moment, and climbing through the window he lowered himself until he hung at full length and dropped. Just as he did so he heard yells and curses from the interior of the house.

"They have entered the room and found me missing,"

thought Dick as he struck the ground, and although jarred considerably he did not pause an instant but ran around the house and to the stable. He was on the point of entering when he found his way barred by the dwarf, Cat.

"Ye kain't go in theer!" the dwarf hissed, and he made a grab for Dick.

The youth leaped back and evaded the other's grasp and then he struck out with all his might. He was in great hurry and had not a moment to spare. The blow took effect fair between the dwarf's eyes and knocked him down; but he was up again in an instant, with a snarl like an enraged bulldog. Again he leaped at Dick and again the youth knocked him down; and then, seeing that the queer, misshapen fellow was too tough to be knocked senseless by a stroke of the fist, Dick drew a pistol, reversed it, and struck him a terrific blow on the head.

Down the dwarf went, this time to stay a while, and Dick leaped forward and called out: "Major!" A whinny came from a nearby stall, and in a few moments Dick had bridled and saddled his horse. Then he led the animal forth and leaped into the saddle. As he did so the front door of the tavern burst open and the landlord and his five companions came running out.

In order to get back in the direction from which he had come that evening, Dick would have to pass these men; and with a word to Major, who bounded forward as if shot out of a cannon, Dick drew his pistols and cocked them.

He was almost upon the men before they saw him, and as they gave utterance to startled and angry yells, Dick gave utterance to a wild shout and fired his pistols point-blank in their faces.

One man dropped, with a howl of pain, and another was knocked down by Major's hoofs, and the next instant the youth was past the men and flying down the trail. Presently the crack, crack of pistol shots sounded, but the Tory outlaws had waited too long; Dick was around the bend in the trail and was not in any danger from the bullets.

If ever there were angry men it was the Tory outlaws when they realized that the youth had not only escaped but had wounded one of their number. The wounded man was Hank Mull, and he had a bullet in his shoulder which made him groan most dismally. "I guess I'm er dead man!" he muttered. "I'm hard hit, I tell ye!"

The others fired a few shots after the fleeing youth, as we have said, but they did no damage. This done, they lifted Hank and carried him into the tavern where they proceeded to examine his wound.

"How is et—am I er goner?" the wounded man asked anxiously.

The landlord shook his head. "Oh, no," he said; "yer uvorth er dozen dead men yit, Hank. Ther woond's more painful than dang'rous."

"Waal, I'm mighty glad ter heer that. Say, ther ternal haoung feller'll be ther death uv me yit, ef I don' look out."

"That blamed hoss uv his'n knocked me silly fur er minnet," grumbled one of the other men, feeling of himself, here and there. "I thort my arms'n legs wuz all broke, but I guess none uv 'em hain't, arter all."

"Waal, he's got erway, arter all," growled Ben Burke. "I wanted ter settle with 'im fur ther way he treated me, but I guess ez how I won't git ther chance now."

"He may cum back erg'in," said the landlord.

"Whut! him cum back erg'in? I'll bet he don' do nothin' fur ther kin'!"

"Whut makes ye think so?"

"'Cause he'd be erfraid ter cum."

The landlord shook his head. "I'm not so shore uv hhet," he said; "in my 'pinion, jedgin' frum whut I've heen uv 'im, he won't stay erway becos he's erfraid."

"But why would he come back? Do ye think that he—  
lhet he hez took er shine ter Mary?"

"No, I don't think that."

"Waal, whut d'ye think'd bring 'im back heer, then?"

The landlord was silent and seemed to be pondering; then presently he said: "Ye've got me theer, Ben, but I've cum kinder suspishus uv that young feller."

"Suspishus uv 'im?"

"Yas; don' ye see nothin' in his axshuns uv ter-night ter poake ye suspishus?"

"Waal, I dunno exactly."

"Waal, I do. Jes' think uv et fur er minnet. He cum ter a-lettin' on that he wuz goin' over inter Georgy, an' what does he do but go back ther way he cum!"

"Thet's so! I hedn't thort uv that."

"An' he didn't go ter bed ertall ter-night. He cum heer ertsur some purpuss, an' I think he'll be back erg'in."

"D'ye think he's er spy, Bill?"

"I shouldn't be s'prised."

"An' we didn't suspeck et in time!" There was disappointment in Burke's tone.

"Waal, he couldn't hev foun' out very much in ther time he hed, Ben, so I think we're safe in lookin' fur 'im ter cum back erg'in, an' then we'll git 'im."

"I hope so."

"By ther way, I wunder how et happened that ther young feller got his hoss outer ther stable? Cato wuz theer, askz he allus is."

"Mebby he killed Cato."

"Ef he hez," said the landlord, "an' I ever git my han's onter 'im, I pity 'im, that's all!"

"Le's go out an' see," said Ben, and he and the landlord hastened out of doors and to the stable. They found Cato, just struggling to a sitting posture. He was muddled and did not know just what had happened. He could make no coherent reply to the questions put to him at first.

"Thet feller mus' hev hit 'im er turrible clip," said Burke.

"You air right," was the reply; "oh, he's er bad wun, that feller is!"

They helped the dwarf to his feet and he presently recovered the use of his faculties and the first thing he did was to give utterance to a string of curses that almost made the atmosphere smell like burning sulphur.

"How did it happen, Cato?" the landlord asked, when the dwarf had stopped for lack of breath. "How came ther feller ter git ther better uv ye?"

"How did he do et? W'y, he jes' knocked me down like ez ef I wuz er bag uv straw—done et twice, with his fist, an' then hit me over ther head with ther butt uv er pistol. Arter that I didn't know nothin' 'till jes' now. Who is ther feller, ennyhow?"

"I dunno; he's er bad wun, is all I know erbout et, an' I suspeck that he's er spy sent heer by ther rebels ter see whut we air doin'. I'd like ter git my fingers onter 'im!"

"An' so'd I!" fiercely.

"I say ther same," said Burke.

"I wouldn't hev b'leaved that enny feller c'u'd hev cum heer an' took er hoss outer ther stable without ye bein' willin', Cato," said the landlord, "but he done et."

"Yas, he done et—but I'd like ter see 'im do et erg'in!"

"Waal, we may git another chance at 'im. I ruther think he'll cum back."

"I hope so!" hissed the dwarf, as he felt of his sore head.

The landlord and Ben Burke returned to the barroom and found Hank resting a bit easier. It was decided, finally, to take him to a room upstairs and let him stay there till he got well, as it was too far to his cabin to try to get him there.

He was taken to the room and then the other men took their departure, going to their cabins, and the landlord locked the door of the tavern and went to bed. He did not get to sleep for quite a while, but he was not the only one who was awake. Mary, his daughter, had been awakened by the uproar made when Dick escaped, and she had not returned to her bed until after she learned that the youth was safe out of the reach of her father and his friends. And when she did return to bed it was not to

sleep. The handsome, fearless face of the young stranger was before her eyes constantly and kept her awake.

## CHAPTER VII.

### DICK FINDS CAPTAIN SHANNON.

"That was rather a close call," mused Dick as he rode onward through the night. "Those Tory outlaws are desperate men, and I think they would not hesitate a moment to take a man's life. I fear that they murdered Captain Shannon. Poor Miss Amesby!"

It was quite dark, and as the roads were rough and winding, Dick did not go very fast. It took him an hour and a half, at least, to travel three miles, and then he caught sight of the light made by a camp-fire; at the same instant he was challenged:

"Who comes there?"

"It is I, Dick Slater, Sam," was the reply, Dick recognizing the sentinel's voice.

An exclamation of satisfaction and joy was heard, and the sentinel called out: "So you are back again, Dick? Jove! the boys will be glad to see you! They were beginning to feel uneasy, and Bob has been pacing back and forth like a caged tiger."

"They ought to know better than to be uneasy about me, by this time," said Dick, with a laugh; "I always manage to get through in safety."

"Yes; but a fellow might make it safely ninety-nine times and miss it on the hundredth."

"That's true, too, but I am not going to do so if I can help it."

Dick was soon at the camp and was greeted joyously by the youths, of whom there were a hundred—the famous "Liberty Boys."

"Did you learn anything, Dick?" asked Bob Estabrook eagerly, when the former had unbridled and unsaddled his horse and tied it among the other animals, and taken his place amid the group of youths.

"Not much, Bob."

"Did you find Bald Knob Tavern?"

"Yes."

"What sort of a place is it?"

"Well, it is, I believe, the headquarters for the Tory outlaws."

"You think so?" eagerly.

"Yes."

"How far from here is the tavern?"

"About three miles."

"Were you in the tavern?"

"Yes; I took supper there."

"Well, well! And did you learn nothing regarding Captain Shannon?"

"I learned that he stopped at the tavern as he was on his way to Georgia, Bob. His name was on the register-sheet."

"Well, that is something to know, anyway."

"Yes; but, of course, I could not learn whether he had gone on his way in safety or whether he had been murdered by the Tory outlaws."

"Which do you think happened?"

"Well, judging from what I saw of them and my experience with them, the probabilities are that the captain was murdered."

"Did you have an encounter with any of them?" asked Bob eagerly. "Tell us about it!"

Dick told of his encounter with the eight Tory outlaws and with Ben Burke, and also with the gang at the tavern when he made his escape, the youths listening with deep interest.

"Well, you have had a lively time of it, I must say," remarked Mark Morrison when Dick had finished.

The others said the same.

"Yes, I had rather a lively time," was the reply; "I failed, however, in finding anything which would go to show what fate overtook Captain Shannon, and I am rather well satisfied."

"What are you going to do about it, Dick?" asked Bob.

The captain of the "Liberty Boys" shook his head. "I hardly know," was the reply. "I must not give up the search. I cannot return to Miss Amesby without having discovered what became of the captain."

"No, that wouldn't do at all."

"You won't dare venture back to the tavern, will you?" asked Sam Sanderson.

"I will do so if I can't learn anything any other way. I can go there at night and spy on the Tory outlaws and listen to their conversation, and might learn what I want to know."

"You are not going back to-night, are you?"

"No; they are too greatly excited and would not tell me of anything I would care to hear about. I will remain at the camp to-night, will put in to-morrow scouting around a good deal, getting the lay of the country and then to-morrow night I will begin the work of playing the spy."

Soon the youths lay down and went to sleep and were

bright and early in the morning. After breakfast Dick selected Mark Morrison and Sam Sanderson to accompany him, leaving Bob in command of the force at the encampment.

"I don't think it would be a good plan to take more than a couple of the boys with me," he said in reply to Bob's question regarding why he did not take more; "you see, I am just going to scout and reconnoitre, and three will be enough for the work."

So they took their departure and went afoot, as horses would be in their way. They wished to move through the underbrush and timber and amid the rocks, for they would have to pit themselves against men who had lived in these wilds all their lives, and it would require great skill and woodcraft to enable them to keep from being seen and perhaps captured.

They walked steadily for more than an hour, and then Dick gave the word for them to stop. He told the two youths to remain where they were until he looked around a bit. He went away and was gone half an hour. When he returned he said: "I have discovered the entrance to a cavern. If I am not mistaken the cavern is in the back of the great hill of rock known as 'The Bald Knob,' and which gives the tavern its name. It might be that in that cavern we would find something that would throw a light on the mystery of Captain Shannon's disappearance. We will investigate, anyway; so come along. But be very careful as we don't know but the cavern may be inhabited by Tory outlaws."

They moved forward and were soon near enough so that they could see the mouth of the cavern in the wall of rock which rose slantingly before them.

"Jove! I've dropped one of my pistols!" exclaimed Sam, in a whisper. "I must go back and get it. It can't be far back as I saw it when we were back there waiting for you to come back, Dick."

"Yes, go back and get it; you might have need of it, Sam," was the reply.

Sam hastened away, and Dick and Mark stepped out and approached the entrance to the cavern. As they did so seven or eight fierce-looking men leaped upon them from behind a giant boulder and quickly overpowered them despite their struggles. Dick and Mark both tried to cry out as to warn Sam, but their throats had been seized in strong hands at the very first onslaught and they had found it impossible to do more than gurgle.

Sam found his pistol about seventy-five yards back, and then he hastened to rejoin his comrades; he did not suspect anything until he had stepped out from the edge of the

brush and scrubby timber, and then it was too late; the men were upon him.

The third "Liberty Boy," like his two comrades, was seized, and, in spite of his struggles, was made a prisoner. The youths were in the hands of the Tory outlaws!

Dick had had time to take a look at their captors, and he recognized them as being the eight men who had stopped him the day before, and from whom he had escaped by the aid of Major, who leaped and reared and whirled and knocked some down and scattered the rest like nine-pins.

The men had recognized Dick also and the leader took up a position in front of the youth and grinned at him triumphantly. "Waal, whut d'ye think erbout et, now?" he asked presently.

The gags had been removed from the mouths of Dick and Mark as soon as Sam had been made prisoner, which proved that the outlaws had been watching them and knew there were but the three in the vicinity. Dick was able to answer, therefore, and he said:

"What do I think about what?"

"W'y, erbout takin' ther oath uv allegiance ter ther king."

"I think the same as I did yesterday."

"Oh, ye do, do ye?" with a leer.

"Yes."

"I s'pose nothin' would make ye change yer min'?"

"I am sure of it."

"Humph! Ye may not be so shore uv et arter we hev tried perswadin' uv ye fur erwhile."

"I don't think any persuasion would have any effect."

"Our kin' uv persuadin'll hev effeck," was the confident reply; "'tenny rate, ef et don't, then we kin kill ye an' git rid uv three rebels."

This was said in a matter-of-fact manner that left no doubt in the minds of the hearers that the man meant what he said.

"Anuther think we air goin' ter do," the outlaw went on, "is ter surroun' an' wipe out yer hull force uv er hundred men whut is encamped down ther trail erways. Oh, we know all erbout et," as he noted Dick's look of surprise and dismay; "ye don' think ye c'u'd cum inter these heer mountings with ez big er force ez that an' us not know ye wuz heer, d'ye? Ef ye thort so ye wuz badly fooled, I'm tellin' ye!"

Dick was quick-witted and shrewd. He realized in an instant that his "Liberty Boys" were in great danger, and he was determined to do all he could to avert the danger, so he said, in an off-hand way, and with a smile that few people would have suspected was forced: "My friend, what

do you take me and my men for—fools? Do you suppose we expected to make our way up here into the mountains without your knowing we were here? Oh, no; we were not so foolish as that, and when you go to try to wipe out that force you will find that you have been fooled yourselves. We know what we are about, I assure you; and even this capture you have made will avail you nothing."

"Ye think et won't do us enny good, hey?" with a grin.

"I am sure of it." Dick said this so confidently that the outlaw was nonplussed and looked at him searchingly and doubtfully.

"Yer er funny feller," he said; "but I think that we'll be able ter do all we hev set out ter do, and by this time ter-morrer theer won't be nothin' left uv yer gang."

"I would be willing to wager considerable that you will find you are mistaken," said Dick, calmly, yet at the same time there was a great fear for the safety of his brave "Liberty Boys" gnawing at his heart. Oh, if he could only manage in some way to send warning to Bob and the youths.

"Bring 'em erlong, boys," the leader said, and he led the way into the cavern. The men seized hold of Dick and his two comrades and they were conducted into the cavern and the walk was kept up for a distance of a quarter of a mile at least, so Dick judged. The way was winding and crooked, but the men followed it unerringly, even in the gloom.

At last a stop was made and cloths were tied over the eyes of the prisoners. What could this men, they wondered. They could not think. They understood that there was something that their captors did not want them to see, but of course they could not guess what it was.

They were led a short distance, making several crooks and turns, and then they were made to stop; following the stop they heard a queer, grating noise, and they wondered what could have made it.

While they were wondering they were again hustled forward, and after moving a short distance were again brought to a stop. Then again the grating noise was heard.

Next the cloths were removed from the eyes of Dick and his two fellow-prisoners, and they were free to look about them. To their surprise they could see quite plainly and took note of the fact that they were in a large, rocky compartment, perhaps one hundred feet square. They looked around to see where the light came from and were amazed to see at one corner an immense chimney-like opening which extended, up and up, a distance of at least a hundred feet; and above could be seen the blue sky.

Suddenly, as the youths looked around them, a cry of

amazement and joy escaped Dick's lips. "Look!" he cried nodding toward the farther side of the cavern. "As I live, there is Captain Shannon!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### MARY CARRIES THE NEWS TO THE "LIBERTY BOYS."

The two looked in the direction indicated, and exclamations of amazement and joy escaped their lips also.

"It is he, sure enough!" cried Mark.

"It's the captain, alive!" from Sam.

"Dick—Dick Slater, is it indeed you?" cried Captain Shannon, holding out his hands toward the three, with a gesture of joy at seeing them. He was fastened to the stone wall by a chain, which was fastened around his ankles so could not advance to greet them:

The Tory outlaws looked at the youths and then at one another in amazement.

"So ye fellers know wun anuther, d'y'e?" the leader asked.

"So it seems," replied Dick calmly.

"Lemme see," the man said, meditatively, "he called y Dick Slater, didn' he? Seems ter me ez ef I've heerd te uv ye, young feller."

"Ye bet we've heerd tell uv ye!" spoke up one of the outlaws who had not before spoken. "Ye air ther captin uv er ban' uv young fellers whut air called 'Ther Libe Boys uv '76.'"

"An' ther gang that is camped down ther trail is the 'Liberty Boys,' without enny doubt!" the leader said. "Waal, we'll put an' end ter ther career uv ther 'Liberty Boys'!"

"Maybe you will, and maybe you won't," said Dick calmly; "may I go over and have a talk with my friend?" he added.

"We're goin' ter leeve ye heer with 'im, an' ye kin tor all ye wanter," was the reply. Then the leader of the party of outlaws made a gesture to the men and they left the apartment, going through a heavy, wooden door at one corner.

The youths hastened over to where the captain was and greeted him joyously. "We feared you were dead, captain," said Dick; "and although sorry to find you a prisoner, we are glad to find you alive."

"And I am glad to see the faces of friends," the captain said; "though I am sorry to see you prisoners in the terrible place."

"Oh, well, perhaps we won't be prisoners long," said Dick, with a cheerful air; "we may be able to escape."

The captain shook his head. "I fear not," he said; "at least not without assistance from the outside."

"Well, we may receive help from the outside; my men are within three miles of this place."

"But I doubt if they could find us if they were to search months," the captain said gloomily. He had been a prisoner for nearly three weeks, and the confinement had told upon him and caused him to be downhearted, as was natural.

"Well, we are four, now, and may be able to escape without assistance from the outside," said Dick, who was a youth who never despaired. He believed that while there is life there was hope.

"Your hands are free; see if you can loosen our bonds," he added. "Try mine, and then if you succeed we will readily be able to free Mark and Sam."

The captain set to work and as he worked Dick told him how it happened that he and his "Liberty Boys" were in the mountains. And when the captain learned that they had been sent by his sweetheart, Alice Amesby, and that Dick had seen her only three days before, he, for a time being, forgot that he was a prisoner and was happy in listening to Dick, and thinking of his sweetheart.

"So Alice sent you!" he murmured again and again. "The dear girl! Ah, how I wish that we might be able to escape from this terrible place! How I would like to see her again!"

"We will escape, or know the reason why!" said Dick. "I hope so!"

It did not take so very long to free Dick's arms, and soon those of Mark and Sam were freed also. Then Dick began making an examination of their prison. He walked around the huge apartment and looked to see if there was a point that offered any chance at all for escape; but after making a thorough search he was obliged to acknowledge that he could not see much chance. To attempt to climb up through the chimney-like opening would be of no avail, for the sides were almost perfectly smooth. The only other place that offered anything at all was the door; but it was a massive affair and was undoubtedly barred firmly on the outside, for it was impossible for the three to even shake it.

"You see," said the captain, when they returned to where he sat, "there is no chance to escape without outside help, and even then it will be a difficult matter, even if those on the outside knew just where to look for us."

Dick was forced to admit that the outlook was not en-

couraging, but he said for all to keep up their courage. "I have the utmost faith in Bob's shrewdness and discretion," he said; "and if there is any such thing as finding out where we are and effecting our rescue, he will accomplish it."

"He will that!" coincided Mark Morrison.

"But they may take him unawares and strike the boys a severe blow," said Sam dubiously.

"I don't think they can do that," said Dick; "I cautioned Bob to keep a sharp lookout and to keep sentinels out constantly. I am sure the outlaws will not be able to surprise him; and if they have a fair chance to fight they will certainly make it more than interesting for the enemy."

While they were thus conversing the eight Tory outlaws had made their way back out of the cavern and had hastened by the nearest path to the Bald Knob Tavern. They entered and found McClurg, the landlord, in the barroom; there were also four or five men present—outlaws like themselves.

"Hello, boys! What is up, now?" asked the landlord, nothing that the men looked somewhat excited.

"What's up?" the leader replied. "Waal, we've done er good stroke uv work, that's what's up."

"What hav ye done?" eagerly.

"Made er capter."

"Made er capter?"

"Yas."

"Who hav ye captered?"

"Ye'd never guess."

"Then tell us an' don' keep us waitin'."

"Yas, yas!" was the cry. "Tell us!"

"All right; I'll do et. We've jes' captered ther young rebel whut is knowed ez Dick Slater, ther captaining uv ther 'Liberty Boys,' whut we've heerd tell uv!"

"Whut!" cried the landlord. "Hav ye done that fur er fack?"

"That's what we hav!"

"Yas, an' two more fellers with 'im," volunteered another of the outlaws.

"Two more?"

"Yas."

"Whur air they?"

"We hav put 'em in ther pen erlong with ther other rebel whut we've hed therer fur so long."

"They're in therer now?" cried the landlord.

"Yas."

"Good! Say, that is all right! An' ye air shore that wun uv 'em is Dick Slater, ther captaining uv ther 'Liberty Boys'?"

"Yas, I know he is; that's whut ther feller called him that we hev hed in theer fur ther pas' three weeks."

"Then we hev made er big ketch, shore enuff, fur that theer Dick Slater is er mighty important feller, an' I don't doubt that we kin git er good bit uv munny ez ransom fur 'im."

"I expeck we kin; that'll be er good skeem, won't et?"

"I think so."

"But whut'll we do erbout his gang, Bill?"

"His gang?" exclaimed the landlord, who was ealled "Bill" by most all of the Tory outlaws.

"Yas."

"Whur is his gang?"

"Erbout three miles erway."

"Ye don' mean ter say ther hull gang uv 'Liberty Boys' is that cluss heer, d'ye?" cried McClurg.

"Thet's jes' whut I do mean ter say."

"How do ye know et?"

"I've seen 'em."

"How mennu air theer uv 'em?"

"Erbout er hunderd."

"Humph! Waal, we mus' git ther boys tergether an' go fur ther rebels an' kill 'em er drive 'em outer ther country."

"I think that's whut we'd better do."

"Yas; theer hain't no other way ter do."

After some further conversation the landlord told his companions that he would go and interview the prisoners, and he left the barroom and made his way upstairs. As he entered the hall from the barroom, Mary McClurg was walking rapidly toward the kitchen, with her back toward her father. He glanced at her suspiciously, but said nothing.

"I wunder ef she hez be'n listenin' ter our tork?" he asked himself. "Waal, et don' matter ef she hez. She couldn't do ennythin' ter he'p ther pris'ners ef she wanted ter. I kinder think she'd he'p 'em ef she c'u'd, fur she hez be'n kinder kickin' over ther traces ever sence she cum back frum Charleston. She got sum fool idees erbout right an' wrong put inter her head while she wuz theer, but she'll furgit erbout et arter she's be'n hum fur er spell, I'm thinkin'."

Mary McClurg had indeed been listening to the conversation, and she was sorely troubled by what she had heard. She knew that there were in the mountains within a radius of five miles at least two hundred desperate men who would not hesitate to kill the "Liberty Boys," of whom she had heard mention made. "I am sure that the young man who saved me from death at the hands of Ben Burke was Dick Slater," she said to herself; "he said his

name was Sam Sparks, but I am sure he didn't wish known who he really was, and gave me the first name that entered his head. And now he has been captured and held a prisoner in the pen—wherever and whatever that is. I have heard it spoken of before, but I have never been able to learn what it is or where located."

Then a thought struck her: Her father had said he was going to interview the prisoners—why not follow him and see where he went? Then she thought of the fact that he had gone upstairs, and this surprised her. The "pen" could not be in the tavern, she was sure of that. What then, could it be—and where was her father going?"

Mary decided to follow him and find out, and she quickly acted. She had a rather difficult task, she imagined, for the landlord did not think that any one would be following him, so did not look behind him at all. The result was that the girl was enabled to keep track of him with much trouble.

She followed him up into the attic and here, to her surprise she saw her father open a secret door at one side of the side next to the great wall of rock known as Pine Knob. When the door was opened a dark passage was shown beyond, and an inkling of the truth came to the girl. The passage led to the "pen," of which she had had no mention made.

She hoped that her father would leave the secret door open, but was disappointed; he closed it, and when she went and tried to open it she could not do so. The spring or whatever it was that operated the door could not be found and she was baffled.

"Well, I have learned something, anyway," she said to herself.

Fearing that her father might come back and find her there, she went back downstairs and to the kitchen, where she did a lot of thinking. She hardly knew what to do. She had considerable liking for her father, for he had always been very good to her, but she knew he was really an outlaw and felt that she ought not to lend him any assistance, even by remaining passive; no, she was determined, knowing that danger threatened the band of "Liberty Boys," she ought to go and warn them and also tell them of the capture of their three comrades.

Mary decided that it was her duty to do this, and soon afterward stole out of the tavern and away. She did not know just where to look for the "Liberty Boys," but did not doubt her ability to find them. She had heard one of the men say they were about three miles away, and knew it must be in an easterly direction. So she set off down the trail, and walked as fast as she could, keeping

sharp lookout for any of the men of the locality, as she did not wish any of them to see her.

She was so fortunate as to not meet anybody, however, and after a walk of a little more than an hour she suddenly was startled by hearing a voice cry out:

"Who comes there?"

She was startled only for an instant, and then, feeling confident that the person who had challenged her was one of the "Liberty Boys," she replied:

"I am a friend."

"Advance, friend!" came the command and the girl did ordered. She was soon standing in front of a youth of perhaps nineteen years, who started at her in wonderment and admiration.

"Who are you?" the youth asked, smiling pleasantly.

"I am Mary McClurg."

"Mary McClurg?"

"Yes."

"Where do you live?"

"At the Bald Knob Tavern."

The youth started. "At the Bald Knob Tavern, you?" he exclaimed.

Yes; and now I wish to ask you—is this the camp of "Liberty Boys"?"

It is."

I am glad to know that. I wish to see the one who is command."

Very well, miss; go straight into camp and ask for Estabrook."

Very well, and thank you." The girl walked rapidly toward the encampment, the youth doffing his hat as she passed him. In another minute the girl appeared before youths, who were seated about, talking and laughing, her sudden and unexpected appearance certainly surprised them.

I wish to see Mr. Bob Estabrook," the girl said, pausing looking around her upon the faces of the youths. Instantly one of the youths leaped up and was bowing before the beautiful girl. "I am Bob Estabrook," he said.

"What can I do for you, miss?"

I have come to bring you some news," the girl said.

Some news?" Bob remarked, inquiringly, while all listened with great interest, while gazing in admiration upon maiden's face.

Yes, sir. My name is Mary McClurg; I live at Bald Tavern, and I have come from there to tell you that some of your comrades are in trouble."

In trouble!" cried Bob. "How do you know this?"

"I heard—some men talking. They said they had captured three young men and had placed them in a prison pen along with another prisoner, who has been there some time."

"I am afraid Dick, Mark and Sam have been captured, fellows," said Bob, turning toward his comrades.

"It looks that way," was the reply.

"Was the one you speak of as 'Dick,' the young man known as Dick Slater?" the girl asked.

"Yes," said Bob, "he is Dick Slater, the captain of this party which is known as 'The Liberty Boys of '76.'"

"He is one of the three who are prisoners."

"I was sure of it the instant you said three had been captured; but we must get to work and rescue them at once."

The girl shook her head. "I fear you will find that a difficult task," she said.

"Why so?"

"For the reason that you do not know where the prisoners are held, and for another very good reason."

"What is the other reason?"

"You will have all you can do to take care of yourselves."

"What do you mean?"

"I will tell you: These mountains are filled with rough, fierce men—Tories and outlaws in reality—and they are going to get together and try to kill you all or drive you out of the mountains!"

"Ah! so that is what they are going to do, is it?" Bob exclaimed.

"Yes."

"About how many of these men will there be when they get together, miss?"

"I judge there will be about two hundred of them."

"As many as that?"

"Yes."

"Well, we will be able to hold our own against that number now that we have had warning that they are going to try to annihilate us."

"You may be able to do so," the girl said, "but it won't leave you any chance to try to rescue your comrades."

"True," acknowledged Bob, with a thoughtful look on his face; "I hardly know what we are to do under the circumstances." He was silent a few moments, thinking, and then asked: "Do you think there is any danger that those men will kill our comrades soon?"

The girl shook her head. "I don't think so," she said; "I heard my—I heard one of the men say that they would hold this Dick Slater and his companions prisoners, and

try to get some money as ransom for them from their friends."

"Ah, they'll hold them for ransom, will they?" cried Bob, his face lighting up. "Good! That will give us time, and I think that we will be enabled to effect their rescue ultimately."

The girl looked doubtful. "There are so many more of them than there are of you—of the outlaws, I mean—that I fear you will be unable to rescue your friends," she said; "you will be driven away from this part of the country and will not dare return."

"They'll have hard work driving us away," said Bob grimly.

"Still I fear they will be able to do so for they outnumber you two to one, and they know every foot of the ground for miles around, while you do not."

"We'll soon be familiar enough with the ground," said Bob.

"I hope you will be able to hold your own and stay," the girl said.

"We will do our best; I thank you for your kindness in coming to us with the information, Miss McClurg."

"I am as glad to be able to do something for you as you are to have me," the girl said; "one of your comrades did me a favor yesterday afternoon, and I am glad of the opportunity to do something in return."

"That was Dick Slater," said Bob, and the girl nodded.

"I suspected as much," she said; "he said his name was Sam Sparks, but when I learned that Dick Slater was in this part of the country I made up my mind it was he who had saved my life."

"You are right, Miss McClurg; he told us about it last night when he got back to camp after visiting the Bald Knob Tavern."

"Did he tell you about—about what I said regarding my father?" the girl asked hesitatingly.

Bob nodded. "Yes, he told us all."

"The leaders of the Tories and outlaws in these mountains are my father and Ben Burke, who was going to kill me," the girl said resolutely; "and I will tell you how I think you may be able to find where your comrades are held prisoners." Then she went on and told about having watched her father and seen him disappear from the attic, through a secret door.

"There must be a cavern in the face of the bluff," said Bob; "and it is concealed from view by the tavern."

"There must be some other way of reaching the cavern, then," said Mary; "for I am positively sure that the men

who captured your comrades did not bring them through the tavern."

"Likely there is another way of reaching the cavern," agreed Bob. "Well, we must try to find it."

"You will need first to look to your own safety," the girl said warningly.

"We will be on the lookout for the enemy, miss," said Bob.

A few minutes later Mary bade the "Liberty Boys" good-by and took her departure.

## CHAPTER IX.

### MARY'S PLAN.

When she was gone the youths held a council of war. They realized that they were confronted by a serious problem: How should they hold their own against the outlaws, and at the same time manage to rescue their comrades?

This was a question that was hard to answer, but the youths did not for a moment doubt that they would be able to ultimately do both.

"Well, I guess the first thing to do is to teach the outlaws that we are dangerous fellows to fool with," said Bob. "What do the rest of you think?"

The others thought the same. "The way the girl told it, I don't think Dick and the rest are in any immediate danger," said one; "so we might as well get ready for a fight and give the outlaws a fight before trying to rescue the boys."

It was decided to do this, and as the position they occupied was a strong one they simply put out an honor guard of sentinels and waited patiently for the coming of the enemy.

There was no sign of the enemy until the middle of the afternoon, and then a shot from a musket announced that the outlaws were at hand. The youths seized their rifles at once and took up their positions behind trees and rocks, and presently the sentinels came into camp and selected safe positions.

"Are there many of them?" asked Bob of one of the sentinels.

"Must be about two hundred," was the reply.

"All right; we can stand them off, all right."

The outlaws were cunning. Finding that they could not take the youths by surprise, they scattered and each

ounding the encampment, approached slowly and gradually, keeping themselves sheltered behind stones and trees. They were surprised when they got within musket-shot distance of the encampment, to find that the youths whom had come to kill or drive out of the mountains were good at taking advantage of the shelter of rocks and as themselves, and although both forces began firing, kept it up for an hour or more, no material damage done on either side. Three of the outlaws were wounded and two of the youths sustained slight wounds, so the others were about easy.

The leader of the outlaws was Ben Burke, and finding his men could make no headway, and fearing to charge on the defenders of the camp, he gave the signal for men to retire, which they did.

They went back up the trail a distance of half a mile, and set to hold a council. "I tell ye, them fellers air bad s," said Ben, with a sober shake of the head; "they pw theer bizness, they do. They air ez good at hidin' and rocks an' trees ez we air, an' they're jes' ez good s, too. I think we hed better not try ter do ennythin' arter dark."

The others thought the same, and they went into camp until it for darkness. They had brought some cold bread meat with them and ate the food and waited impatiently for darkness. It came at last and they set out on the encampment of the "Liberty Boys."

Bob was expecting an attack and was all ready for them. Tory outlaws crept up as close as they could, and then suddenly dashed forward, giving vent to wild yells. Doubtless they thought to frighten the youths, but failed of course so. The "Liberty Boys" were veterans and had seen heard too much to be frightened by noise. They were ready and poured a deadly volley into the ranks of the shing outlaws.

The volley was a severe one, and a number of the members of the attacking party went down. Shrieks, yells and curses went up. Pandemonium reigned. Then the outlaws opened fire, but the "Liberty Boys" were protected by stones and trees, and did not sustain much in the way of losses. They fired another volley, from their pistols, did considerable execution. Still another volley they fired and this was too much; the outlaws turned and fled. At ended the affair for that night. Ben Burke was in some respects. He realized that his men were at disadvantage in having to do the attacking, and made his mind to wait and see if he could not think of some way of getting at the "Liberty Boys." He and his friends retired a distance of half a mile and went into camp.

Then, after waiting half an hour or so, about half their number stoic back to the vicinity of the enemy's camp and went to work to get their wounded away.

Bob Estabrook knew what was going on, but he told the youths not to fire. "Let them take their wounded away," he said; "it will save us the trouble of having to look after the poor fellows. I was just beginning to think that I could not stand it to hear their groans of suffering much longer."

Ben Burke and his men carried away the dead bodies of those who had fallen as well as the wounded, and after burying the dead they set out for the Bald Knob Tavern, carrying the wounded, of whom there were fifteen.

When they reached the tavern, and McClurg learned that seven of the men had been killed and fifteen wounded, his anger was terrible to witness.

"We'll hev wun more try at them theer fellers," he said, "an' then ef we don' succeed in gittin' ther better uv 'em we'll kill ther pris'ners an' git even in that way—that's what we'll do!"

And Mary McClurg, who was listening at the door leading from the hall into the barroom, shuddered. "Father will do what he says!" she said to herself. "Oh, what shall I do? I must save that brave, handsome young man who saved my life! I must!"

Presently a thought came to her and she murmured: "Perhaps it will work successfully. Father thinks a great deal of me, and the plan may work. I'll try it, anyway."

Mary had been aroused from her sleep by the coming of the men, and she had stolen down to the door and listened, and now fearing she might be discovered she hastened back to her room. She heard the trampling of feet, voices in low conversation, and groans for at least half an hour, and knew that the wounded men were being carried upstairs and given places in the bedrooms. At last all became still, however, and the girl went to sleep.

She was awake at an early hour, and rising, dressed, and, stealing downstairs, left the tavern. She hastened down the trail and reached the "Liberty Boys'" encampment just as they were getting ready to eat breakfast.

The youths were surprised to see the girl, but greeted her pleasantly and asked her to take breakfast with them. As Mary had left the tavern without stopping to get anything to eat, she was hungry and accepted the invitation; and while eating she told Bob what she had heard her father say about killing the prisoners, in case the next attack on the "Liberty Boys" was not successful.

Bob and the other youths looked grave at this. "It seems, then, from what you have told us, Miss McClurg,

that in order to save the lives of our comrades, who are prisoners in the hands of the outlaws, we will have to let them get the better of us in the next encounter," said Bob, knitting his brows; "and that is something we cannot think of. We must think of some way out of the difficulty. There is no use talking, we must rescue our comrades, and at once!"

"I have thought of a plan which may succeed," said the girl quietly; "that is the reason I came so early to see you."

"What is the plan?" asked Bob.

"It is this: For me to stay here in your camp, and then you can send a messenger to the tavern, under a flag of truce, and you can tell my father and Ben Burke that unless they will agree to release the prisoners, you will hold me and carry me away with you a prisoner. Offer to ransom the prisoners with me, in fact."

"Do you think they will agree to it?" asked Bob.

"I think they will. They were willing to let the prisoners go in return for a money ransom, and I think they will value me at more than the worth of any sum of money they would have received."

"It is worth trying, at any rate," said Bob; "one thing is certain, we are not going to let them get the better of us in an encounter, and that leaves us nothing else to do save to effect the release of our comrades by strategy."

"True; and as you might not be able to find the place where your comrades are confined it will be better to secure their release in the way I have suggested, if you can do so."

"You are right; and I thank you for your kindness, Miss McClurg. I will send a messenger to the tavern at once."

"Do so."

After thinking the matter over for a while, Bob decided to go himself. Having decided, he mounted one of the horses and rode away. Fearing that he might encounter some of the Tory outlaws enroute, he carried a white handkerchief in his hand. Luckily, however, his fears proved to be groundless; he did not meet any of the outlaws, and reached the tavern, to find them all there.

To say that they were surprised when he rode up is putting it mildly, and they stared at the youth with wonder and admiration. They regarded him as showing great bravery in coming alone into their midst.

"I wish to see Bill McClurg and Ben Burke," said Bob, after he had reined up his horse almost at the piazza steps, and right in the midst of the outlaws.

A young man, who had been sitting on a bench on the piazza, rose, and after calling into the barroom through

the open door, "Come heer, Bill," stepped forward faced Bob. "I'm Ben Burke," he said.

"As soon as McClurg comes out I will tell you wh am here," said Bob.

The tavern keeper came forth a few moments later took his place beside Burke. He glared at Bob fier but he might as well have saved himself the trouble. met his look unflinchingly, and even grinned at him. did not please McClurg, and he growled out:

"Waal, who air ye, an' whut d'ye want?"

"My name is Bob Estabrook," was the quiet reply, "I' have been in command of the 'Liberty Boys' since capture of their commander, Dick Slater. I believe two are the leaders of this band of men?" indicating men with a sweep of the arm.

"Yas, we air," was McClurg's gruff reply. "Whut et?"

"I have a few words to say to you, and a proposition make."

"Go erhead."

"Very well; in the first place, then, you have s prisoners in your hands, I believe?"

"Yas, we hev; an' we're goin' ter keep 'em, too—fun while, at enny rate, an' then ther proberbilities air we'll hang 'em!"

"That is just why I have come to you. I wish you set the prisoners free."

"Oh, ye do?" in a sneering voice.

"I do."

"Waal, ye kin jes' keep on wantin'. We hain't erg ter set 'em free, an' ye kin mark that down!"

"I don't ask you to do it of your own free will; I a prisoner as well as you, and if you will set those p oners free I will set the one I have free—in other word will give you the prisoner I hold as ransom for the prisoners you hold."

McClurg and Burke stared at Bob in open-mouth amazement. "Who hev ye got er pris'ner that's enny ter us?" the former growled.

"Your daughter Mary!"

"Whut's that!" McClurg fairly yelled. A curse escaped the lips of Ben Burke.

## CHAPTER X.

"THE LIBERTY BOYS' RANSOM."

"My darter Mary, ye say?" cried McClurg, afte moment.

"Yes."

"Whur did ye git holt uv her?"

"It doesn't matter where; I have her a prisoner, and that is sufficient."

"But ye won't hurt her—ye won't dar!" cried Ben Burke. A cold smile came over Bob's face. He was a youth who could act when it was necessary, and he considered that it was necessary he should make these rough fellows believe he was as cruel-hearted as they. So he said: "There is just one thing that has got to be, and that is this: You've got to release those four prisoners! If you don't—all the consequences be on your own heads!"

"I don't believe ye've got Mary er pris'ner," said McClurg.

"You are badly fooled if you think that."

"How did ye git holt uv her?"

"As I said a while ago, that does not matter; I have her and that is sufficient."

McClurg turned and rushed into the tavern. He ran back to the kitchen and asked the cook if she had seen Mary. The cook said she had not, and then both searched every room in the house, and, of course, did not find the girl. The man was forced to believe, finally, that Mary had gone out for a morning walk and had been set upon and made a prisoner by some of the "Liberty Boys." He went back out upon the piazza, looking blue and angry.

"You didn't find her, did you?" asked Bob, coolly.

"I'll tell ye what I'll do," said McClurg: "I'll set them pris'ners free ef ye'll set Mary free."

Bob shook his head. "Couldn't think of it," he said.

"But that's fair; win fur win."

Again Bob shook his head. "Not at all," he said calmly; "I like such beautiful girl as your daughter Mary is worth men, any time. It's all or none."

"Et hain't er fair deal ertall," protested McClurg.

"Yes, it is."

The tavernkeeper motioned to Burke, and the two went into the barroom. "Whut shall we do?" McClurg asked. "Don't like ther look in ther eyes uv that feller, Ben; how with you?"

"It's the same with me. I wouldn't trust 'im, I tell ye. Looks desprit. Et's big odds—four fur win, but I s'pose we hain't got much ter say in makin' terms."

"No; he's got us foul."

"He hez that."

"If ye think we had better giv' in an' take Mary er win fur ther tour?"

"I think we hed."

"All right; I'm willin' ef ye air. An' mebby we kin hit

ther cusses er lick afore they kin git outer ther mountings, arter ther 'xchange is made."

"Mebby we kin."

"We'll try et, ennyhow."

"Ye bet we will!"

The two went back out onto the piazza.

"Well?" remarked Bob, eyeing the two searchingly.

"We've concluded ter giv' in, an' take Mary er ransom fur ther four pris'ners we hol'," said McClurg.

"That is sensible," was the approving remark from Bob; "and after the exchange has been made we can settle the question of which force is the stronger," with a grin.

"Don't ye fret erbout that!"

"Oh, I'm not! But bring forth the prisoners at once and let us start for my camp."

"We'll bring 'em right out. Come erlong, ha'f er dozen uv ye fellers."

Six of the outlaws entered the tavern with McClurg, and they were gone nearly half an hour. When they returned they were accompanied by Dick Slater, Mark Morrison, Sam Sanderson and Captain Shannon. At sight of Bob the three youths uttered cries of delight.

"We knew this was your work, old man!" said Dick, joyously.

Bob grinned. "That's all right," he said. Then he added: "I have only one horse for the five of us. How'll we work it?"

"Let Captain Shannon ride," said Dick; "he has been in confinement so long that he is weak. The rest of us can walk."

The captain protested a bit, but was overruled, and mounted and rode while the others walked.

McClurg, Burke and about fifty of the outlaws accompanied the little party. "All we want is to be shore that ye giv' us Mary in 'xchange," said the landlord; "an' I'm bringin' erlong enuff men ter make shore uv this, that's all."

"That is all right," said Dick.

When they were half way to the encampment of the "Liberty Boys" the party came to a stop. "We hev cum ha'fway," said McClurg, now ye go ter yer camp an' bring Mary heer an' we'll make ther exchange."

"That is fair," said Dick; "Bob, you ride to the camp and bring back the girl—and bring at least an equal number of the boys to the number of outlaws here," he added.

Bob nodded. He didn't trust the outlaws, and, like Dick, thought them quite capable of trying to play a smart trick and refuse to give up their prisoners, once they got hold of Mary.

Bob was gone scarcely more than three-quarters of an hour, and then returned accompanied by Mary McClurg, and escorted by fifty of the "Liberty Boys." When McClurg saw the youths a frown came over his face.

"Whut air all them fellers comin' fur?" he growled.

Dick motioned toward the fifty outlaws. "We thought it only right that we should have as many men present as you have," was the youth's reply.

"Humph! Ye didn't think we'd try ter fool ye, did ye?"

"Well, we didn't know; we don't intend that you shall do so."

McClurg saw it would do no good to bluster, and said no more. The exchange was effected, and after some conversation, the outlaw leader very kindly advising Dick and the "Liberty Boys" to leave the mountains, the two parties parted.

"I tell you what it is, Dick," said Bob, looking back over his shoulder at the party of outlaws, "I hated to see that girl go back with that gang!"

"Why so, Bob?"

"Because I don't think she wanted to do so; this ransoming or exchanging was all her scheme, old man."

"It was?"

"Yes;" and then Bob told how Mary McClurg had come to them and suggested that they pretend to hold her a prisoner and make negotiations toward using her as ransom for the prisoners in the hands of the outlaws.

"Jove! she is a noble-hearted girl!" said Dick. "It is too bad, as you say, that she is doomed to live among such people."

"So it is, Dick."

Half an hour's walk brought them to the encampment, and their coming was the signal for wild cheering on the part of those who had been left in the camp. They were glad to see Dick, Mark and Sam back again, safe and sound. Many of them were acquainted with Captain Shannon; too, and were delighted to greet him.

Dick, Bob and the rest talked the situation over and discussed the question whether to start back toward Charleston at once or to wait and give the Tory outlaws another chance at them.

"What do you say, Captain Shannon?" asked Dick. "You are the one who has suffered most at the hands of the scoundrels."

"It doesn't matter to me, Dick," was the reply; "stay a while or start back at once, just whichever you choose."

Dick turned to Bob. "Somehow I have a feeling of fear that those scoundrels may not treat that girl right, Bob," he said; "I know that McClurg is her father, but

he is a heartless scoundrel, in full sympathy with Ben Burke, another scoundrel, and as the latter wishes to marry the girl and her father wishes her to accept Burke for a husband, they may torture or even kill her. I believe he will wait here a day or so and endeavor to find out how fares it with the girl. What do you think?"

"I think it no more than right, Dick. I am confident that you four fellows would still be in the hands of the outlaws but for her. I'm for staying till we know the girl is to be treated fairly."

So it was decided, and that evening at an hour before sundown they were glad that they had so decided, for Mary McClurg suddenly appeared. She was panting and almost exhausted from running. Her hair was disheveled and there was a wild light in her eyes.

"Save me! Save me!" she cried, sinking to the ground.

"We will take the best of care of you, Miss Mary," said Dick. "What is the matter? Who is trying to harm you?"

"My father—Ben Burke—all of them!" the girl gasped.

"And they are chasing you?"

"Yes; they will be here in a minute—all of them! You must be on your guard!"

"Is the entire force of Tories coming?"

"Yes, yes! Nearly two hundred of them!"

Dick gave rapid orders and the "Liberty Boys" were soon so situated as to make it impossible for the outlaws to attack with much hope of doing material damage; then they waited.

Not for long. The outlaws soon put in an appearance but were wise enough to stop at a safe distance. McClurg came forward, bearing a flag of truce. "I want my daughter," he said when Dick stepped out to talk to him.

"Your daughter?" remarked Dick, simulating surprise.

"Yas; she's heer, an' ye needn't try ter say she hain't. She cum this way, an' I know she is heer, an' want 'er."

"But perhaps she doesn't want you."

"Thet don't make no diff'rence; I'm her father."

"That doesn't make any difference, either," said Dick calmly; "you don't act like a father should."

"Thet hain't enny bizness uv your'n."

"I think it is."

"Waal, I don't, an' I want my gal!"

"You will have to keep on wanting, for you won't get her."

"I won't."

"No."

"Ye don't mean ter say ez how ye'd dar' ter keep 'er erwa frum me?"

"She doesn't want to go back to you."

"Bah! She's on'y er gal, an' don' know whut she wants." "I think she does know. At any rate, I shall not give her up to you unless she wishes to go of her own accord." McClurg was silent for a few moments, and then he said: "I wanter see ther gal er minnet."

Dick stepped back and told Mary that her father wished to speak to her. She advanced, and, looking at her father fiercely, asked: "What is it you wish, father?"

"I want ye ter cum back hum with me, Mary."

The girl shook her head. "I cannot do it," she said.

"Ye hed better!" threateningly.  
"No!" the girl's tone was firm.

Then McClurg addressed Dick. "Ye hed better send her back ter me," he said fiercely; "ef ye don', we'll kill 'ry wun uv ye! Not er single wun uv ye will git outer dese heer mountings erlive. But ef ye'll send her back ter aine we'll let ye go without botherin' ye."

"Thanks," said Dick, scornfully; "but I cannot accept your kind offer. If you wish to attack us, go right ahead."

You will find that the 'Liberty Boys' are more than able to take care of themselves. To tell the truth, I feel a little bit hard toward you for having made a prisoner of myself and two comrades, and I would like a chance to strike your force a severe blow. We are not only ready and willing to fight you, but are rather eager for the opportunity."

With a muttered curse McClurg whirled and walked away, without once looking behind him.

"That settles the matter, Miss Mary," said Dick; "he has given up hope of getting you to come back, and now you are free to accompany us to Charleston."

The girl drew a long breath. "I shall be glad to get here," she said; "Aunt Hester will be glad to have me with her. She wanted me to stay when I was there a few months ago."

"I am glad to know that you will have a good home and will not have to fight your way among strangers."

The Tory outlaws made several attempts to get at the "Liberty Boys" so as to have the advantage, but were unsuccessful. The youths were on their guard and greeted the outlaws with bullets whenever they came too close, and at last McClurg and Burke gave up and gave the order to fire.

They went back to the tavern and proceeded to drink to drown their disappointment. McClurg and Burke drank more than was good for them, and got to quarreling, and from that to fighting, and had it not been for the interference of some of the men would have fought till one or both was dead. As it was, they became deadly enemies, and

the force of outlaws took sides, some siding with McClurg, some with Burke. There had always been some jealousy between the two regarding who should be the leader of the mountain band of Tory outlaws, and now that Mary had gone the only thing that had kept them friends had been lost and there was no longer reason why they should be friends.

We may as well state that the affair developed into a feud, which grew stronger and more fierce with each month, and the result was that the two cliques practically wiped each other out. At the end of a year there were only a mere handful of Tory outlaws left in the mountains, and one night the Bald Knob Tavern was set on fire by a member of Burke's party, and was burned to the ground. McClurg was never seen after that night, and it was generally supposed that he perished in the flames. Burke died soon afterward, from wounds which he had received at different times, and the feud languished for want of leaders for the two factions.

Dick Slater and his "Liberty Boys" reached the home of Alice Amesby in due time and found her there. To say that she was delighted when she saw her lover, Captain Shannon, alive and well, is stating the matter mildly. She could not thank Dick enough for what he had done, but he said no thanks were needed, as he was a friend of the captain's and owed it to him to go to his rescue, anyway.

Mary McClurg and Alice Amesby became great friends at once and Mary accompanied Alice to Charleston, after bidding Dick and the "Liberty Boys" good-by. That was the last time the youths ever saw the girl who had been used as ransom for the three "Liberty Boys" and Captain Shannon, but they heard of her occasionally, through Alice Amesby and Captain Shannon, and were always pleased to hear that she was well and happy.

#### THE END.

The next number (73) of "The Liberty Boys of '76" will contain "THE LIBERTY BOYS AS SLEUTH-HOUNDS; OR, TRAILING BENEDICT ARNOLD," by Harry Moore.

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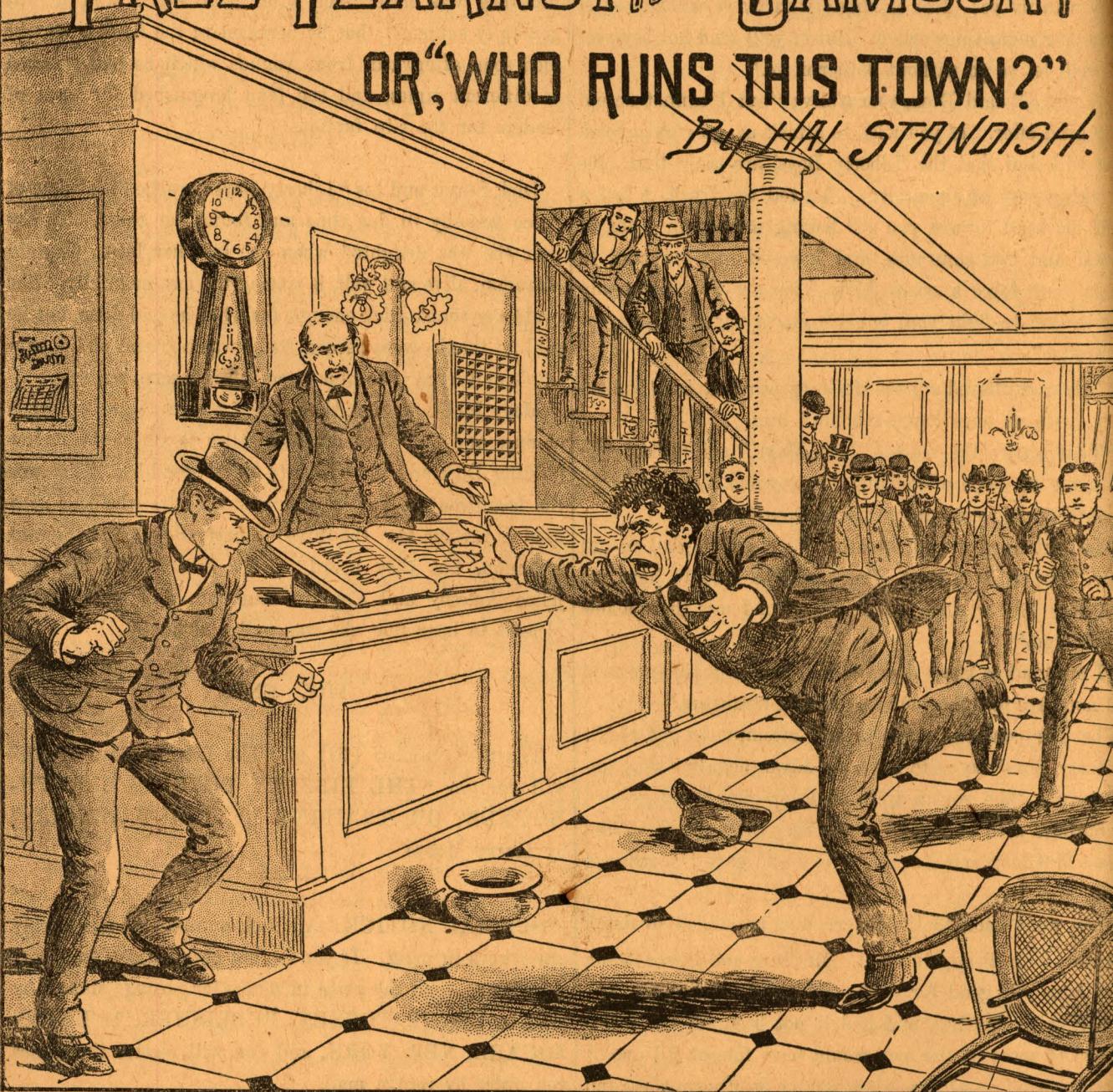
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